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OR, Against Terrible Odds.

A Romance of the Wolves of New York.

CHAPTER I.

A "MARKED" MAN.

LATE in a certain autumn evening of a good many years ago, a fashionably-dressed, one-eyed man, of powerful built was stepping out of a cigar-shop in the Bowery, New York, when there was a firm touch laid on his shoulder.

One-Eyed Thompson, for such was the man's sobriquet in the criminal world of that period, of which he was a bright particular star, wheeled in his tracks with the nervous quickness of one constantly on the alert for just such a significant touch.

He was confronted by a short, thick-set, lynx-eyed man of something namelessly official in his aspect,

BY JACKSON KNOX,
"OLD HAWK"

CAPTAIN CLEW WAS INTENTLY EXAMINING THIS IMPRINT WHEN A STARTLED EXCLAMATION FROM THE THREE MEN CAUSED HIM TO LOOK UP.

"Ah, it's you, Captain Clew!" said the swell-mobsmen, counterfeiting a look of sudden relief. "But of course I can't be 'wanted' this time?"

Captain Clew, then one of New York's most celebrated detectives, smiled.

"Do I ever clap my hand on a man's shoulder unless he's wanted?" he coldly asked.

The veteran criminal made a gesture of philosophical resignation.

"I know you're on the wrong tip," said he. "But what have you got?"

The other displayed a counterfeit bank-note, faintly executed.

"By the Eternal! it wasn't I that shoved it," exclaimed Thompson, with genuine sincerity in his astonishment. "You ought to know that yourself, Cap; by Heaven, you must know it!"

Clew laughed in a non-committal way and beckoned to a policeman, who forthwith took the man into custody.

"Be sure," he said to the officer, in a low voice, "to take him slowly through Great Jones street, lower side, on your way to the station."

But the one-eyed man was still disposed to protest and entreat.

"Look here, Cap," he exclaimed, in downright consternation, "I really haven't shoved a queer rag in a month—on my honor."

"You say so."

"But you must know it just as well as I do."

"Perhaps."

"Oh! a put-up job, eh? But, look you, Cap; you're breaking me up in a particular job—all on the square, too—a mighty important affair."

"Very likely—of the Black Star variety!"

These words, quietly spoken, but accompanied by a cold, piercing look of peculiar significance, completed the man's consternation, as the policeman handcuffed and led him away.

The Bowery was deserted at a much earlier hour in those days than now, and the arrest had attracted no public attention.

As the prisoner was escorted westward through Great Jones street—then ill-lighted and sparsely-built—the detective silently followed.

As an alley-way, leading from Number Four "Niagara" engine-house to Bond street was being crossed, a man lurking therein peered out curiously.

At sight of the prisoner's quandary he was seized with a sort of panic.

"One-Eyed Thompson nabbed!" he exclaimed, half under his breath. "Then the job's off."

And he was hurrying away when the detective, whose stealthy approach had not been noticed, had him by the collar in an iron grip.

"Captain Clew, the Fighting Detective, by all that's holy!" gasped the fellow, as he was being sternly inspected under a neighboring lamp.

"So it's you, Flick?"

"Who said it wasn't?" was the sullen rejoinder.

"Another Black Star job in the wind, eh?"

"Nothing of the sort!"

"Thompson is out, but what others are in it with you, Flick?"

"Dunno what you mean, Cap."

"You lie! However, travel!"

And, on being released, the man darted away to mingle with the crowd pouring out from the opera performance—then established in the adjoining Astor place—some few of which were beginning to straggle along by Great Jones street to Broadway.

The detective stealthily darted after a rotund, well-to-do looking gentleman who had just turned off, after bidding some acquaintances good-night, into the alley-way alluded to.

This was a wealthy and rather eccentric man-about-town of the day, a Mr. Emil Lestrangle, better known as the "Count," who was in the habit of taking this short cut back from the opera, of which he was a constant patron, to his fine old-fashioned bachelor residence in Bond street.

Swift as was the detective's shadowing pursuit, he was not in time to wholly prevent three ruffians from making a sudden and murderous attack upon the Count midway between the two streets.

In an instant, however, he was among the assailants, with the swift, ferocious silence of the bull-dog's spring.

Then ensued a triumph of pugilism in which the detective's fists seemed to be everywhere at once, and in just the shoulder-hitting spots where they would do the most good.

"Good Lord!" growled one of the ruffians; "it's Fighting Cap Clew, the detective!"

And he forthwith took to his heels, his companions likewise scattering off in the gloom, with more or less sign-manual marks of the detective's handiwork.

Mr. Lestrangle was greatly bewildered, but not much the worse for his rough experience.

"Bless me!" he exclaimed, grasping his rescuer's hand. "How can I sufficiently thank you, sir? Are you really the celebrated Captain Clew, of our detective force?"

"My name is Clew, sir."

"Ah, glad to know you. Come home with

me and have a glass of wine. I want to thank you at my leisure."

"That is unnecessary, Mr. Lestrangle, though I may be able to tell you something worth the knowing."

And Clew accordingly accompanied the gentleman.

A moment or two later they were sitting over some wine and biscuits in a luxuriously furnished parlor adjoining the count's bed-chamber on the first floor, the liveried valet having just been dismissed.

"Dear me, dear me!" sighed the host, an amiable-looking gentleman of middle-age, trying to feel at ease in his silk-lined dressing-gown, but still considerably perturbed. "The idea! Me to be thus attacked on the public street! Only to think of it!"

"Rather say dark alleyway," said the detective, with a smile, "and eschew short-cuts in the future, sir."

"That I shall, depend upon it! Let us touch glasses, sir. That's the go, and this is most heartily to our better acquaintance. But, bless me! how my hand still trembles."

"Very natural, sir."

"Yes, for a pampered aristocrat like me—a petted child in luxury's lap, as the novelists would say—of course. But—the deuce take it! did you recognize the scoundrel, captain?"

"Partly."

"Who and what were they, think you?"

"Cole Ashley, Cap Farnham and Jem Gorgio."

"Ah, indeed! Characteristic names, to say the least. But I none the less rejoice that they did not succeed in robbing me."

And the Count, with a chuckle of satisfaction, produced his costly repeater and a fat pocket-book, which he caressingly laid upon an adjoining stand.

"There was no intention of robbing you," said the detective, quietly.

The gentleman stared.

"What!" he exclaimed. "no intention of robbing me?"

"None whatever."

"Zounds, sir, you astonish me! What then did the ruffians intend?"

"To murder you!"

Mr. Lestrangle looked appalled.

"To murder me?" he echoed, half-incredulously. "Why, my dear sir, I haven't, to my knowledge, an enemy in the world."

"Doubtless not, but there are those who might profit immensely by your death."

"Impossible! Neither my brother Louis nor I have any natural heir, except— But that is our closet skeleton, not to be touched upon," with a mournful gesture of putting something disagreeable to one side. "If either of us should die unexpectedly our estates would be found secured to public institutions."

"But your property, if I mistake not, is mainly in real estate?"

"True, every one knows that."

"So that if, upon your death, certain bonded mortgages, for instance, more than covering your entire landed estates, should unexpectedly come to light, duly signed, attested and registered—"

"Good heavens, Mr. Detective! what are you raving about?" amazedly interrupted Mr. Lestrangle. "I never obtained a dollar on bond or mortgage in my life, nor my brother either, for that matter. Our personal incomes amply suffice us, expensive as some of our bachelor tastes may be."

The detective bowed in respectful acknowledgment of the confidence thus proffered.

"I used *if*, Mr. Lestrangle," he resumed. "I said *if* such a lien, apparently genuine and meeting all the requirements of the law, should come to light, after your supposed death?"

"Good Lord! fraudulent, you mean?"

"Yes; but superbly executed, without a seeming flaw, and with corrupt legal, political and even judicial influence to see it through."

The "Count" threw up his hands with a bewildered air, and then filled up the wine-glasses with a trembling hand.

"My dear sir, what do you mean? You say I have this night narrowly escaped not only robbery, but murder?"

"No, not robbery at all; murder alone, pure and simple."

"Ha!"

"Had the discovery of your dead body in yonder alleyway followed upon the success of the plot, your watch and pocketbook would have been found undisturbed upon it; unless, indeed, removed by subsequent thieves, or for the purpose of misleading suspicion as to the actual object of your assassination."

The night was the reverse of warm, but beads of cold sweat began to appear upon the prosperous forehead of the accomplished man-about-town.

"Sir," said he, after a staring pause, "I know you by reputation as a discreet, able and trustworthy man. I entreat that you will be explicit with me."

The detective was now no less earnest than respectful.

"I shall be so," he replied, impressively. "You were already unconsciously in the cun-

ning meshes, and you have this night escaped the final throttling clutch of the Black Star Gang!"

Mr. Lestrangle turned deathly white.

"That terrible, that infamous combination!" he gasped.

His informant gravely nodded.

"What!" continued the other: "the rumors then of such a gang of organized murder and spoliation—so like a slice out of the Dark Ages, or a transplantation of Bengalese Thuggism to our shores—are not a mere creation of the diseased imagination?"

Clew slowly shook his head.

"Far from it," he said, gravely. "It is a living, an infamous fact—an iniquitous blot upon our New York civilization at the present hour."

Somemoments of silence ensued, Mr. Lestrangle seeming too much unnerved to speak.

A reference to the *bona-fide* criminal records of the time—abounding with the names of such once-notorious crime-birds as "One-Eyed Thompson," "Bristol Bill," "Flick Warner," "Cole Ashley," "Cap Farnham," "Fireboy Peters," "Jem Gorgio," *et. al.*, will convince the most skeptical of the existence of just such an organization at the time of which we write.

The best of heirless real-estate owners were "marked for murder," after their signatures had been surreptitiously obtained, and secretly affixed or counterfeited to legally-drawn documents calling for and more than covering the cash value of their real property; not a few of the death-cemented frauds were carried to a successful issue; and the gang comprised, besides professional robbers, forgers, counterfeiters and bravos, lawyers, politicians, business men of outward respectability, and at least one member of the judiciary, each set of rascals having their allotted task in the famous and fiendish scheme.

Such a scheme of organized crime could not at the present time hold together for a week; but was at that period not only feasible, but an existing and appalling fact.

CHAPTER II.

A MIDNIGHT EXPEDITION.

"SIR," said Mr. Lestrangle, "prove to me that what you assert is true—that such an organization as the Black Star Gang really exists—and that you have this night saved me from their murderous clutches."

"I think I can do that, sir—perhaps even more than that," the detective confidently assured.

"Do so, and you will find me not ungrateful. I shall even be glad to make you my personal friend."

"That will most likely follow, Mr. Lestrangle, though we will not consider the subject of reward, at least for the present. To begin with, then, bethink yourself: Is there no way by which the Gang may not have obtained possession of your business signature within, we will say, the last six weeks?"

Mr. Lestrangle shook his head.

"I think not. My business is transacted almost wholly by word-of-mouth with my lawyer, a prominent member of the profession, in whom I place the utmost confidence."

"Humph! Am I to be privileged in my questions?"

"Certainly. Your character is your indorsement, and there is nothing in my past of which I need be ashamed."

"Thank you. Your legal adviser's name, if you please?"

"Mr. Isaac Bat, No. 7 Wall street."

The detective gave an imperceptible start and proceeded:

"Has Mr. Bat enjoyed your confidence for a long time, Mr. Lestrangle?"

"No; only since the death of my former lawyer, the eminent Judge —. But, Mr. Bat's high reputation was in itself a guarantee, and he has likewise become the adviser of my brother, Louis Lestrangle, in Brooklyn."

"Ah! and is Mr. Bat, may I ask, in possession of your signature?"

"Hardly, I think. In fact, I doubt if a written communication has ever passed between us."

"But your signature is doubtless known at your banker's?"

"Oh, as a matter of course."

"No business communications of late, then, with any unknown party?"

"No; that is, except a real-estate agent, who insists on wanting to buy a strip of my Harlem land and won't take 'No' for an answer."

"Ah! his name, if you please?"

"Really, I've forgotten it. Wait!"

The Count produced a number of letters, from which he selected one and opened it.

"Here you are: Tony Goebeling, Real Estate, Office 77 Bowery. A German, or of German descent, I should judge. But, eh? What is it?"

The detective had started again, this time more unmistakably, and was regarding the other with a peculiar look.

"That makes *two*," said he, a little enigmatically. "Yes, they had you thoroughly in the toils—ripe for the slaughter."

"What can you mean? Two what?"

"Two of the gang."
 "What! this real-estate chap?"
 "Yes; to my certain knowledge."
 "And the second?"
 "Mr. Isaac Bat, attorney-at-law."
 "Good God! you can't mean it?"
 "I am morally certain of it, though in Bat's case it will be hard to prove, for, naturally, he is a deep one. I am proceeding slowly."
 Mr. Lestrangle had grown profoundly agitated.
 "This is most extraordinary—most shocking!" he exclaimed. "Sir, were it not for the sterling reputation behind you, I should be tempted to treat these charges with derision, if not contempt and anger."
 "I am certain you will not do that, Mr. Lestrangle."
 "I know it, I know it—of course not! Heavens and earth! to think of me having already been marked for assassination, and doubtless with the plot in readiness to be set in motion for fraudulently securing my estate to these leagued cut-throats directly following my death!"
 "I haven't a doubt of it. The plot succeeded without a hitch in the case of —, and —, and —." And the detective named as many well-known property-owners, foully dealt with, whose estates had been successfully claimed, to the astonishment of friends, by parties who had not been suspected of having the slightest business transactions with the owners while living.
 "There are yet others that I could mention in illustration, but these should suffice."
 "I should say so! I should say so!"
 "Observe, also, that in every case I have referred to, Mr. Bat was the legal representative of the unexpected claimant."
 "I do, I do!"
 "I might go deeper, and ask you to observe further."
 "Observe what further?"
 "That Judge Dredger, the prominent police justice, and Alderman Fake, the influential city politician, were equally conspicuous in giving such claimants a 'character' and public indorsement."
 "What! such men, too, in league with the Gang? Horrible!"
 "More than that, I think it more than likely that Mr. Tony Goebeling, this *pseudo* real-estate man, would be found to have been in correspondence with the victim in each case I have cited."
 "I don't doubt it—that is, not any longer. By Jupiter! after the escape I have had, I am ready to believe any thing. But, that isn't the worst of this appalling business. My brother!"
 "Ah!"
 "Louis Lestrangle, my younger brother. Perhaps you know of him?"
 "Only by reputation. A wealthy Brooklyn real-estate owner, and, like yourself, a bachelor, I believe."
 "That is Louis. Good heavens! they may have marked him, too, and perhaps have murdered him ere this."
 "This is truly startling. Pray explain at once, sir."
 "I have told you that Bat is, also, my brother's lawyer?"
 "Yes."
 "Well, Louis has likewise had communications with this fellow Goebeling."
 "Are you sure of this?"
 "Louis casually mentioned it at our last meeting, day before yesterday. We laughed and compared notes, wondering at the fellow's persistency."
 Captain Clew arose.
 "Sir, this is serious!" he exclaimed. "You should lose not an hour in assuring yourself of your brother's safety."
 The "Count," Mr. Emil Lestrangle, quickly rose likewise, rung the bell, and ordered his carriage.
 "Will you accompany me, captain?" he exclaimed.
 "Yes," assented Clew, after a pause, "I can spare the time, and will. And, on the way, I can explain how I became interested in thwarting the Gang in your special case."
 "Good!" said Mr. Lestrangle, hurriedly preparing for the drive with his valet's assistance.
 "What do I not owe you? And in return—yes, by Jove!—I'll intrust you with a family secret, captain."
 The gentleman's stables adjoined his residence, and, as he was a *connoisseur* in horse-flesh, with a weakness for uncertain hours, his equine establishment was kept in readiness accordingly.
 The carriage was heard to drive round by the alleyway, and the two men were about quitting the parlor when the detective said:
 "Mr. Lestrangle, are you armed?"
 The other shook his head.
 "Yet you are reckoned a crack shot among the galleries?"
 "True, but I have never carried a concealed weapon, on principle."
 "Pray, depart from it on this occasion. There may be need."
 And the detective handed him a brace of small, stocky pistols, in fashion something like

the modern derringer—it was before the day of revolvers and self-cockers.
 They were accepted with some hesitation.
 "You have another pair, then, captain? You are not disarming yourself?"
 "I have these." And Clew modestly indicated his bunches of fives, with which he was known to be so exceptionally handy.
 Mr. Lestrangle smiled, in spite of his anxiety—he was no less an admirer of the "fistic art" than of horseshoe and the hunting-field—and they quitted the house together.
 "John, you might as well come, too."
 "Yezzur, thankee, zur!" And the Cockney valet, who had obsequiously followed his master to the street door, was speedily equipped and alongside the coachman on the box.
 A midnight journey from Bond street to Fulton ferry was quite a serious undertaking forty odd years ago, when even the street-car system was in its comparative infancy.
 "I can tell you in a nutshell how I chanced to interpose for your safety to-night," explained the detective, as soon as they were under way.
 "The looking up of the Black Star Gang has been my special study for months. My discovery of your danger was due to a lucky accident, whose details could hardly be interesting or relevant."
 He then told of his ruse in capturing One-Eyed Thompson, the subsequent consternation of Mr. Flick Warner, and the consequent disarrangement of the plot to assassinate which he, the detective, had effected by his timely interference with the three lesser ruffians in their alleyway assault.
 Mr. Lestrangle could not abstain from a fresh shudder.
 "This One-Eyed Thompson I have often observed as a gentlemanly-appearing gambler about town," said he. "Am I to understand, then, that he is one of the master spirits of the Gang?"
 "Yes, together with the notorious Bristol Bill (otherwise William Cooper), who is fully his equal in brains and daring."
 "And your arrest of Thompson to-night was on a trumped-up charge?"
 "Exactly; I had to have him some way. He'll be loose to-morrow."
 "Indeed?"
 "Yes; for, though a well-known forger, counterfeiter and 'shover of the queer,' he has been really guiltless of anything in that line for a month or more. But, apart from that, his secret pals, Alderman Fake, Judge Dredger and Bat, would have him clear in no time."
 "And but for this initial arrest of Thompson, the murderous machinery would doubtless have proceeded without interruption, and I should now be a dead man in Engine House Alley?"
 "The Black Star Gang's *coup de grace* is not wont to fail—nor to suffer interruption either, for that matter."
 "Good heavens! that is another reminder of my brother's danger. Pray Heaven we be not too late!"
 "Amen! we are doing our best."
 "What," asked Mr. Lestrangle, after an uneasy pause, "are the habits of this man Thompson, apart from his professional rascality?"
 "Exemplary. Gentlemanly in his desperation, he is never known to drink, swear or carouse, though he will and does gamble, by the way. It is his sole weakness, barring his honorable passion for the Handsome Widow, as she is called."
 "Who may she be?"
 "An efficient confederate in Brooklyn, as dangerous as she is discreet and attractive—a certain grass widow, Mrs. Knight."
 Mr. Lestrangle fairly bounded in his cushioned seat.
 "Knight!" he exclaimed, catching his breath. "Heavens! half to himself; 'if it should be the same! Have you seen this woman, captain?"
 "More than once."
 "Her age and appearance?"
 "The sunny side of forty, and appearing much younger; beautiful, dark, robust and stylish; lives with her daughter, who is something of a mystery, in an old house, with extensive grounds, on Hicks street, close to the river."
 "Louis's location, also! Good Lord! if it should prove—By the way, do you know the woman's given name?"
 "Yes; Sylvia."
 "The same, the same! There can be no doubt."
 Then, after a long and somewhat composing pause, Mr. Lestrangle said:
 "Captain Clew, this woman's name suggests the closet-skeleton of my family that I alluded to."

CHAPTER III.

THE LESTRANGE ROMANCE.

WITHOUT further preliminary, Mr. Lestrangle plunged into his story with much hurriedness, as though impatient of a necessary but unpleasant task.
 "My brother Louis and I have not always been contented with the indolent, luxurious old-

bachelor existence for which we have become somewhat conspicuous in New York and Brooklyn society.

"No, indeed! Very nearly of an age, the last sons of a fine old family of Huguenot extraction, always rich, especially in extensive landed estates, carefully educated, and left by our parents' death the masters of our large fortunes in early manhood, with the ability to care for them, and natural amiability of disposition which the fondest of home-indulgence had neither warped nor spoiled, we were twenty years ago filled with public spirit and a virtuous ambition to be something more to our fellow-men than the mere pleasure-loving, useless men-about-town that we have become."

"We had a sister." The speaker's voice trembled. "Marguerite was eight and ten years our junior. We felt rather fatherly than brotherly toward her—in fact, we just worshipped her."

"Beautiful, lovely, impassioned and impulsive, Marguerite's very faults were enchanting, and her virtues were angelic."

"She responded to our devotion with a sisterliness that bade fair to shut out the approach of passion. But Louis and I were thirty and thirty-two respectively, and Marguerite had just attained her twentieth year, when she met her fate—and a deplorable fate it proved!"

"We were all living together in the old homestead, the same at present occupied by my brother in Brooklyn. And it was about this time that Louis and I had, strangely enough, become enamored of the same girl."

"Twenty golden years ago!" as the poor Irish poet, James Clarence Mangan, sung.

"I do not think that Sylvia could have been more than nineteen then, and she was a perfect enchantress. However, though she made many specious professions to fine family connections in England, and had obtained the *entrée* into some good circles in both Brooklyn and New York, before I had got in very deep I began to suspect that she was an adventuress, and perhaps a dangerous woman. I thereupon began to draw off—for she had avoided any show of preference as between Louis and me, while evidently highly pleased with our wealth and social standing—and candidly advised my brother to a similar course."

"But he had become all but irredeemably fascinated, wouldn't hear of anything against her at first, and in fact for the first time in our lives, we came near to seriously falling out over the girl. Fortunately his eyes were opened by an accident."

"A report, pretty well authenticated, was abroad as to Miss Sylvia Disbrow's disreputable, not to say criminal, antecedents in London and Paris. Louis and I were discussing it with our old housekeeper, Mrs. Masters, one evening in the garden, when Sylvia suddenly put in an appearance. She was accompanied by her brother, George Disbrow, several years her senior, a man whom we instinctively detested and feared, but of much fascination of manner withal, whom we had therefore tolerated, howsoever unwillingly, for the beautiful sister's sake."

"Sylvia's dangerous temper was beyond control. Divining the subjects of our thoughts, she burst forth into a denunciation of the disseminators of the scandal, as she called it, in language so forgetful of all etiquette and even decency as to fairly take our breath away."

"Our enchantress had suddenly turned into a fish-woman, with Billingsgate as her home-vernacular."

"Her brother tried to control her, but in vain, and when she at last came to a consciousness of her self-betrayal it was past retrieval."

"My brother, more sensitive than myself, and inexpressibly more shocked in consequence, in polite but firm tones gave her to understand that even the remotest friendliness between her and our social circle was at an end."

"I think she had really come to love him in her mad, ungovernable way."

"At all events, for a moment her comely face was a picture—despair, regret, contrition, self-shame, fury, all struggling for the mastery; then her anger burst forth anew, but in a sullen, hopeless and vindictive way."

"Revenge was the master-chord—she would have it upon us, upon Louis especially. Let us beware, for it would strike when and where least expected!"

"We hardly understood, and cared even less. But, as she was being hurried away by her mortified brother, I surprised a speaking glance between the latter and our beloved Marguerite, at that moment returning from a visit, which ought to have placed me on my guard, but it did not."

"I knew comparatively little of feminine nature then, and Sylvia was so young that, making allowances for some modicum of foundation in the suspicions as to her antecedents—more unfortunate than blameworthy, perhaps—and her chagrin in consequence, I gave her self-betrayal not another thought, save to deplore it, and I think that my brother's feelings must have mirrored my own."

"But the confirmatory revelation, with its attendant disaster, was impending. In less than a month one Knight, a specious European ad-

venturer and self-confessed ex-convict, made his appearance from abroad and openly claimed Sylvia as his wife. Perhaps because there was no help for it, she defiantly accepted the situation.

"Then rapidly followed an *exposé* of her past history, which, considering her youthful years and the kaleidoscopic iniquity that had been crowded into them, was seemingly incredible.

"A companion of adventurers and criminals from her infancy, she had flashed briefly through the seething nether-life of Paris, Vienna, London (her native city) and even some of the Spanish-American capitals; had twice married, once when a mere child to a French gambler, said to have died in an Algiers prison, after cultivating her precocious wickedness to the utmost of his bent, afterward at sixteen to the fellow, Knight, who had probably completed the work of demoralization that was left to be performed; had been in prison herself more times than could be enumerated in detail, once as an accessory to an assassination; and finally, at nineteen, in the flower of her womanly beauty, she was an accomplished linguist, an exceptionally dangerous character, a fascinating bird of prey, a beautiful fiend!

"It was like a hideous fiction from the brain of a Sue or a Gaborian—a romance of crime.

"The adventuress braved it out in our select but limited Brooklyn sphere for just one week, and then disappeared with her consort.

"Her brother, George Disbrow—of the same stripe as Knight, or, if anything, perhaps a little worse—disappeared at the same time, and with him—the narrator's voice, which had been growing husky, here almost broke down—"our darling, our idol, our Marguerite!"

It was some moments before the "Count" could resume, and when he did so it was with a distressing hurriedness.

"We had never even suspected an intimacy. But, after her flight letters came to light, revealing her gradual steps—faltering, timid and remorseful at first, but more assured with each progression—in deception and duplicity at an accomplished scoundrel's instance. The usual way, the old, old story.

"I shall not dwell upon our grief, our mortification—the slow, gnawing tooth that kills not, but eats so torturingly, so consumingly at the heart of family pride and attachment; but we realized that the blow had fallen at the tree's root, and that this was Sylvia's threatened revenge.

"Poor little Marguerite!

"What to us that she came creeping back from abroad to die in our forgiving arms, at the end of one short year, deserted, beggared, with her child at her breast, the scoundrelly destroyer's wedding ring upon her poor finger?

"I must hasten to tell of our second trial, which will complete this unhappy episode of family history.

"After our poor Marguerite's death, which occurred within a month of her return to us, her lovely babe, also named Marguerite, was the chief care and joy of my brother and myself.

"At three years, she was the most consummately angelic little elf imaginable, the idol of our hearts, the apple of Louis's eye no less than of mine.

"Then she disappeared."

"Disappeared!" echoed the detective. "Was she stolen?"

"Yes; presumably by some English Gypsies who had been camping in the neighborhood, but it was never any more than a surmise. Wealth and talent were lavished in the search, but without avail. We have never obtained the faintest clew to the missing child. Soon after this blow, Louis and I separated, he remaining at the homestead, I transferring my establishment to my present location in the metropolis. Neither of us have ever thought of marrying. Had it been otherwise with our poor sister, or even had the little Reeta, as we called our second Marguerite, been left to us, it might have gone different. But, somehow, we have had no heart to indulge in dreams of domestic bliss. We have become the solitary, perhaps useless and selfish, men of leisure, such as we are known to the world, and as such I presume we will remain to the day of our death."

"Strange!"

"Yes, Captain Clew; but perhaps there is many another family misfortune just as strange and sad as ours."

"Excuse me, Mr. Lestrangle; but I was not referring to the general tenor of your family misfortune."

"To what particular, then?"

"To the missing child—or rather to an odd coincidence suggested."

"What is that?"

"I mentioned the fact of the Mrs. Knight, who has become your brother's neighbor, having a daughter."

Mr. Lestrangle again started in his seat.

"Heavens! might she be our missing Reeta?" he exclaimed. "It would be just like the woman to have pushed her vindictiveness yet further by securing the abduction of the child."

"Possibly; but it were well not to leap to a conclusion so hopeful."

"Surely; and yet— Have you ever seen the daughter?"

"Once, and by the rarest accident; for she is enveloped in the same mystery and seclusion that the 'widow' herself affects."

"Describe the girl."

"A girl of about eighteen—"

"Reeta's age, to a dot, if still living."

"Slight, *petite*, singularly graceful and willowy—"

"She would have thus developed, I am sure of it!"

"Small and delicate features—"

"Exactly! yes, yes!"

"Blue eyes—"

"Her own, her own! They were like the sky or the sea, as the swift mood shimmered in their crystal depths."

"Hair of midnight blackness, complexion a rich, pure olive, dark as a Gypsy's, but transparent as an Andalusian's, hands and feet—"

Mr. Lestrangle fell back with a groan, his short-lived enthusiasm giving place to blank disappointment.

"That will do," he faltered. "Reeta, like her mother, was an ideal blonde!"

The detective might have yet offered a modicum of hope, but at this moment the ferry was reached, and the bridge-keeper's palm was thrust into the coach-window for the fare.

"Did you mark that sinister face looking at us over the fellow's shoulder?" whispered the Count, as the lumbering vehicle passed under the poorly-lighted arch, and thence upon the boat, a miserably primitive affair, compared with the ferry-boats of the present day.

Before Clew could reply, the coachman was heard to swear, and the horses to rear and plunge most violently.

CHAPTER IV.

TOO LATE! TOO LATE!

"WILL yez l'ave that boss's head alone, ye shpalpeen?" yelled the driver, who was an Irishman of the old stock. "Be the Powers! aff ye doan't—"

But by this time Captain Clew, followed more leisurely by Mr. Lestrangle, had sprung from the coach, and sent reeling from the horses' heads the stranger whose officiousness had occasioned the disturbance.

"You ought to thank me for interfering!" growled the latter, with a muttered oath, and he glared reproachfully at the detective. "But for me they'd been over the chain and into the river."

"Ye lie, ye blackguard!" roared the coachman, still with difficulty quieting the animals. "They war as peaceful as lambs in the sham-rock till yez grabbed them, ye devil!"

And Mr. Lestrangle's valet here sprung down from the box, turning back his coat-cuffs and spitting on his hands.

"The same face that peered at us over the gateman's shoulder!" whispered Mr. Lestrangle, in the detective's ear.

Clew had grabbed the fellow by the collar.

"Who is this man?" he cried, authoritatively.

"Do any of you know him?"

The gateman called back a surly negative across the bridge, and the boat at that instant pushed out.

A deck-hand, to whom the inquiry had likewise been addressed, dropped the gang-plank that he had been handling, and looked up.

"It's a man what used to work here on the boat, sir," said he. "I don't believe he meant any harm."

And here the subject of controversy suddenly twisted himself out of the detective's grip, and darted off into the gloomy interior of the boat.

The Cockney valet was about to start in pursuit when his master interfered, saying that he would have no further disturbance.

"Never mind," said the detective, "I shall know him again."

He then followed the gentleman back into the coach, closing the door behind them, but at the same instant touched the Count on the shoulder.

"Be cautious, and do as I do," he whispered. "We are spotted, and there is danger!"

With that, followed by Lestrangle, he stealthily stepped out of the coach on the opposite side, and they silently took up a position in the shadow.

The Fulton ferry of that day was supplied with, but one boat of clumsy and unwieldy construction, and its patronage during the hourly night-trips was little short of nil, Brooklyn being a mere straggling village.

"Is it possible?" whispered Mr. Lestrangle, in response. "But you did not recognize the fellow as a spy?"

"No; but remember that you are still a marked man. Wait!"

The boat was miserably lighted. The valet could be dimly seen as having prudently stationed himself at the horses' heads, while the Irish coachman was still growling to himself on the box.

When the flickering lights of the Brooklyn slip at last drew near, the watching pair in the shadow detected a dark figure stealing along the opposite side of the coach.

Clew nudged his companion's elbow, and followed the figure.

The latter had passed crouchingly under the coach-lamp, betraying himself as the suspicious stranger.

As the boat entered the slip, and the two deck-hands stepped over the chain to make fast, there was the usual series of bumps, accompanied by a jingling of the pilot's bell, which has been retained as a characteristic of East River ferriage to the present day.

Instantly the suspicious stranger likewise leaped over the chain.

As he did so, he fired a pistol in the air and gave utterance to three sharp, peculiar whistles.

"Scoundrel!" and at the same instant the detective had him by the throat, while, calling back to Mr. Lestrangle: "Look to yourself, sir, and stay with your servants! *It was a signal!*"

Ay; but a signal that was already answered.

The boat was in, and Mr. Lestrangle had just time to make a startled exclamation when it seemed that a dozen or more ruffianly figures were suddenly poured upon the deck from as many crannies and nooks under the rickety arch of the ferry bridge.

The horses reared and plunged afresh, the coachman swore anew, the valet was handy with his fists, but was as quickly knocked down and dashed aside, and Mr. Lestrangle, remembering only that he was the *marked man*, struck out frenziedly on every hand with his gold-headed walking-stick as the mob of ruffians closed threateningly around him as naturally as water about an obstruction in an incoming tide.

As he was jammed up against the wheels, he suddenly remembered the pistols that had been given him.

A blow struck him in the throat, and then a knife flashed before his eyes.

As he produced and discharged one of the pistols Clew's encouraging shout rung in his ears.

Then, as the would-be stabber reeled back with an oath, Mr. Lestrangle saw his dastardly assailants suddenly melt away before the lightninglike shoulder-hitting of the Fighting Detective, as tumultuous clouds before the swift brightening of the volcano's glare.

It was ding-dong, right and left every time, the scoundrels going down one after the other like men of straw.

But for all that they picked themselves up and scampered off as fast as they were knocked down, the last one exclaiming as he vanished over the bridge:

"Holy smoke! it's black eyes for the Black Stars this time, and no mistake!"

"Are you hurt, sir?" demanded the detective, anxiously.

"Not worth mentioning," and Mr. Lestrangle grasped his hand heartily. "Gad, sir! aren't you sometimes called 'Flash-Finger' no less than the Fighting Detective?"

"Sometimes," was the modest reply.

"Gad! I don't wonder. Why, you went through them like greased lightning! and, for my own part, I am satisfied I pinked the big fellow with a knife. But come; sha'n't we pursue them, or at least notify the police?"

They were following the coach out over the bridge, the driver still controlling the horses with much difficulty and the discomfited valet having rejoined him on the box.

"It would be useless," said the detective. "And Brooklyn police! Did you hear that shout about the Black Stars?"

"I should say so!"

"Well," in a guarded voice, "I don't know a constable or policeman this side of the river who could be trusted as against the Black Stars."

It was an uncomfortable reminder for Mr. Lestrangle as to his still being a marked man.

"My brother Louis!" he gasped. "Let us hasten. Heavens! if we should be too late!"

"Shall we re-enter the coach?"

"No; it can follow. The homestead is but a few steps away."

He led the way across the broad, shaded avenue, at the present day the largest and busiest horse-railroad terminus in the entire country, to some handsome grounds covering the space now occupied by the solid block between Hicks street and the water-front.

It was bright moonlight.

Leaving the coachman and valet with the equipage at the gate, the Count and the detective proceeded through the well-kept but old-fashioned grounds to the house, a substantial old-time suburban residence.

Here, in answer to repeated knocks, old Mrs. Masters, Louis Lestrangle's Scotch housekeeper, at last cautiously thrust her night-capped head out of an upper window.

"What! is it your ain sel', Maister Emil?" she cried out. "Wait, an' I'll be wi' ye."

"Never mind coming down, Mrs. Masters," said Mr. Lestrangle, with ill-concealed anxiety in his voice. "Is my brother at home?"

"At home, but na in the hoose at present, Maister Emil."

"Not in the house?"

"He be dootless moonin' in the grounds wi' his cigar on the river-bank, Maister Emil. He

ha' slept puirly the twa nights back, an' I heerd him go oot an hour ago."

"Come!" said the Count; and, without another word, the two men hurried away.

When in sight of the river through the trees, a faint cry for help reached their ears.

They broke into a run.

Too late!

Mr. Louis Lestrangle lay upon the green bank, which was much trampled as by a recent struggle, weltering in his blood.

The detective raised the unfortunate gentleman in his arms, while the brother, too overcome to speak, bent silently over him.

The dying man with a last effort pointed to a neighboring hedge, separating the grounds from the adjoining water-front property.

"From there," he gasped, "from there! Curse her! curse—"

He was dead.

Then, as the detective gently lowered his inanimate burden, Emil Lestrangle threw himself upon it with such an agonized great cry that both his coachman and his body-servant came running upon the scene.

Under a bush, close to the trampled grass, lay a white handkerchief, which the detective slipped into his pocket, unperceived by the others, who were still bending, horror-stricken, over the murdered man.

Then his falcon glance took in the remaining evidences at a single sweep.

Several pairs of vigorous masculine feet had evidently trampled over the spot where the actual struggle had taken place, but in the soft, mossy earth about the bush, whence he had picked up the handkerchief, there was the single imprint of a delicate woman's shoe.

Captain Clew was intently examining this imprint when a startled exclamation from the three men caused him to look up.

They were staring at the hedge, amid the ragged edges of which a youthful face, beautiful but ghastly in the moonlight, came and went like a flash.

"One of you follow me!" cried Clew; and he was over the hedge like a bolt from a gun.

But, fast as he flew, the owner of the momentary face flew faster.

Or, was it human at all?

There was a mere streak of something, presumably a feminine garment, through the shrubbery, a sudden vanishing, as if it had not been, and that was all.

CHAPTER V.

THE GRASS WIDOW.

THE detective, however, was speedily brought to a stand at the side-door of a house into which he felt sure that the mysterious fugitive had disappeared.

John, the valet, had followed, and was already at his side.

It was a rambling, somewhat dilapidated and apparently deserted house, in the midst of a vast, neglected garden.

Clew unceremoniously pounded for admittance, but for a long time with no answer save from the empty echoes within.

He turned to the valet.

"You," he queried, "must have caught a second glimpse of the person we pursued?"

John, though a bluff and sturdy fellow, was only just recovering something of his nerve.

"It's the apparition you mean, sir?"

"You can call it that."

"Yezzur, with my hown heyes I saw it, and it must 'ave faded right into the side of this 'ere 'ouse, sir."

"Then it is not alone within," and the detective renewed his clamor.

A window at the side of the door was at last raised, and a comely but very swarthy young woman fearlessly thrust out her head into the moonlight.

"What's all this rumpus about?" she angrily demanded, with a slight foreign accent. "D'ye think we're dead and in our shrouds, that you raise such a din?"

"The living will answer for us," was the detective's response, and he described the fugitive.

"No such person here! My mistress and my young lady are the only ones in the house besides myself, and they're asleep in their beds, if you haven't scared them into fits. Go along about your business!"

"I make it my business to be right here. I am a detective policeman."

"Oh, if you're a peeler, it's different."

"Yes. Who is your mistress?"

"A lady what always minds her own affairs."

"Her name, if you please?"

"Mrs. Knight."

"And the young lady you alluded to?"

"My mistress's daughter."

"Your own name ought to be a pretty one, if but to match your face, my good woman?"

"It's Jane Gorgio, at your service, Mr. Officer," gently at last, for the Fighting Detective could be soft-spoken and winning on occasion.

"Well, Jane, it is absolutely necessary that I should communicate with your mistress with the least possible delay. A horrible murder has been committed in the adjoining grounds, and

we are positive that a—a witness of the crime fled into this house, or somewhere in the near vicinity."

"A murder?" And, as the young woman started back with a shocked expression, a woman's voice called out to her from within. "Wait, sir, please. It's my mistress calling me."

She returned, after a moment's absence, to say that her mistress was dressing and would receive the officer in the drawing-room, if he would step around to the front of the house.

Clew started to obey, after signing the valet to remain on guard where he was.

"Take your man with you, Mister Officer!" called out Jane Gorgio.

"Not to be thought of, my dear young woman!" said the detective, sweetly. "That would leave your side of the house wholly unprotected."

"Oh, indeed! Well, young man, you are civil, and no mistake."

As Clew disappeared round the angle, John, the valet, advanced a step nearer to the woman in the window.

"My heyes!" he exclaimed, admiringly.

"Whatever's the matter with you, young man?" inquired swarthy Jane Gorgio, with a swift smile that flashed out her white, even teeth to advantage.

"You're a Hinglish Gypsy, you are, an' I'm a-bettin' 'igh on it!"

"You're not risking a loss, John Thomas."

"Bless me, miss! 'Ow did you know my name?"

The lady's maid laughed in a gurgling, enjoyable way.

"Catch an English Gypsy not knowin' a London flunky on sight, John Thomas!" said she. "La, now!"

The cockney was only half-flattered this time, but Jane Gorgio's smile was yet more complacent, and the exchange of civilities proceeded apace.

It was interrupted by a cry, almost a scream, from the direction of the drawing-room, and the lady's maid disappeared.

The drawing-room, which had apparently been lighted but a few moments, presented something of a tableau as Jane entered it.

Mrs. Knight, her mistress, half-supported by Miss Maggy Knight, was shrinking back and pointing, with parted, quivering lips and horrified eyes, at the composed figure of the detective, whose announcement of the murdered gentleman's name had caused the sensation.

Both ladies were noticeably handsome brunettes, the younger especially so, with the additional charm of youth and budding maidenliness.

The latter was likewise startled, but with wonder, no less than alarm.

"Hush, mamma, hush! Compose yourself," she was saying, soothingly. "Can't you speak? What has the—the gentleman" (with a significant inflection) "said or done to alarm you so cruelly?"

As the elder lady seemed incapable of replying, notwithstanding some smelling-salts which Jane Gorgio had hastened to administer, the detective bowed and said:

"Miss Knight, I presume?"

A somewhat haughty bow of assent, but one that could not harden the indescribable sweetness and melancholy of the youthful face.

"I merely mentioned," he went on, "the name of your mother's neighbor, in connection with a frightful crime just brought to light, with the unfortunate effect that you perceive."

"It was not that alone," Mrs. Knight at last found voice to cry out hysterically, "but the way you said it, sir!"

Clew made a deprecating gesture, and forthwith gave such particulars of the crime as he knew.

"This is frightful!" exclaimed Miss Knight, while her mother gradually regained her composure. "I have lived so secluded here with my mother, sir, as to only know the unfortunate gentleman by reputation." She had turned very pale. "Murdered, you say?"

"Undoubtedly."

"And by whom, think you?"

The detective fixed his eagle eyes searchingly upon the elder lady's face, which, however, afforded no further self-betrayal, as he responded, slowly and impressively:

"To the best of my knowledge and belief, by a ruthless organization of criminals, known as the Black Star Gang!"

"The Black Star Gang!" repeated the girl, wonderingly. "I never heard of such a thing."

"It is not to be wondered at, in view of your youth and self-evident purity, Miss Knight. Not to be wondered at, even with the dread symbol of that secret order of assassins present before your very eyes."

Mrs. Knight suddenly checked a significant gesture at this moment.

"You astonish me, sir!" exclaimed the young lady. "To what can you allude?"

"To the principal design of your mother's brooch and bracelet. They are these secret symbols of the Black Star Gang."

Mrs. Knight wore a hastily-assumed dressing-

robe of crimson satin, which was caught at the throat by a glossy jet star, crusted with brilliants, and a bracelet of the same design was loosely clasped about her shapely wrist.

She smiled composedly, and Miss Knight gave a relieved exclamation.

"This is too absurd!" said she. "Mamma has had the ornaments as long as I can remember—fifteen years, at least."

"The exact age," said the detective, as if talking to himself, "as near as can be computed by outsiders, of the Black Star Gang itself!"

"Do you really mean," cried Miss Knight, angrily, "to connect my mother with a band of assassins?"

"I assert nothing, Miss Knight."

"But can you pretend to any clew to that preposterous idea, sir?"

"Only what is embodied in myself."

"What do you mean?"

"My name is Clew—Captain Richard Clew, detective, at your service, miss!"

Here there was a swift, piercing look from Mrs. Knight's black eyes into his, but nothing more.

The younger woman made a gesture of angry impatience.

"Oh, indeed! Well, Captain Richard Clew, detective, pray place yourself at our service by stating what brings you here at this unconscionable hour."

"I have already stated it. I tracked a person—perhaps a witness of the crime—to this very house."

"Into this house?"

"I think so."

"You err. We three women were the sole occupants until your entrance. The doors were secured. No one could have entered without our knowledge."

"I am not so sure of that."

"What makes you think so?"

"My glimpse of the fugitive's face."

"What was it like?"

"A woman's face."

"A woman's?" in unqualified astonishment.

"A young and beautiful woman's face!"

"Sir, you positively amaze me!"

"I see that I do, and it bewilders me to see it."

"You are bewildered at my amazement?"

"Just so."

"And wherefore?"

"Because the fugitive's face, though white to bloodlessness in the fleeting glimpse I had of it, bore such a striking resemblance to—your own!"

It was simply an appalled look of increased mystification which this unexpected announcement caused to spring into the young woman's face, and the detective had to confess to himself that the kindred astonishment manifested by the two others was no less genuine than her own.

He was therefore sorry to have spoken as bluntly as he had.

When Miss Knight had, in a measure, recovered her composure, she looked Clew steadily in the eyes.

"I give you my solemn assurance, sir," said she, quietly, "that, of my own knowledge, I have not been outside of this house to-night. Do you believe me?"

The detective picked up his hat, and made his parting bow.

"I do believe you—I simply can't help it!" he replied, frankly.

"How then do you account for my resemblance to your mysterious fugitive?"

"I don't attempt to account for it—it is simply unaccountable. I only know that it exists. Ladies, I present you with my apologies."

"One moment, sir!" interposed Mrs. Knight, advancing. Self-possessed, as at present, she was a superbly beautiful woman, with a commanding presence. "Could you give me a single name of the—the Black Star Gang, as I think you called it?"

"To what purpose, madam?"

"Simply to assure me that the said organization is not a creature of—of your excited imagination." And her lip curled.

The detective leaned forward, encountering the black daggers of her glance with the steely glitter of his own.

"Mrs. Sylvia Knight, your hardihood is not unbecoming," said he, in a low voice. "One of the chief criminals of the Black Star Gang is variously known to notoriety as George, John, and One-Eyed Thompson."

Despite her renewed self-command, the woman started, and her countenance changed visibly.

"That shot told, at all events," thought the detective, as he made his way into the open air without further ceremony.

John Thomas was at his post, and had nothing to report as having occurred during their separation.

As they were taking their way back to the hedge, a slender, secret-looking man, with a sneaking gait and hang-dog countenance, stole across their path.

"Better than I hoped for, Feeny," said Clew, without betraying any surprise, though the

valet was not a little startled. "From whence did you scent my game?"

"From the Bond street house, sir," was the reply. "I stuck to the coach-wheels all the way over."

"Good! You will remain on guard here until relieved by Danny Crook, or some other message from me. Understand?"

"Yes, sir." And the man vanished as suddenly as he had appeared.

Upon recrossing the hedge, it was found that the body of the murdered gentleman had been conveyed to the homestead house.

CHAPTER VI

A CONFERENCE.

A FORTNIGHT had passed since the assassination of Mr. Louis Lestrangle, without any certain clew to the doer or doers of the dreadful deed.

The "Count," or Mr. Emil Lestrangle, was seated alone in the library of the homestead house, in which he now spent a considerable share of his time, when Captain Clew's name was announced.

Mr. Lestrangle's easy-going, rather jovial air had given way to a set look of troubled if not careworn sternness since that fatal night.

It was as if the care-free, pleasure-loving man-about-town had evolved into a resolute and avenging spirit, and this was not far from being the case.

But his face brightened as the detective entered, for the latter brought with him an encouraging aspect.

"Our case is growing," announced Clew, taking a seat, "and yet there is also fresh mystification."

"Ah! about the girl-witness?"

"Yes."

And the detective produced two handkerchiefs.

"Well?"

"Observe that they are both of the one lace-and-cambric pattern, and that an unusual one."

"That is obvious," assented Mr. Lestrangle, examining the handkerchiefs.

"This one, crumpled and stained, is the one I picked up near the small footprint at the scene of the murder."

"I recognize it."

"This, its snowy mate, was obtained for me by John Thomas, your body-servant, from Jane Gorgio, Mrs. Knight's maid, to whom he is making love."

"Ah!"

"It is Maggy Knight's property. So is the other one—the tell-tale handkerchief, so to speak—by fair presumption."

"Yes; both being of the one unusual pattern. That is fair."

"But I have something better than presumption," and the detective produced a woman's tiny walking-hoe, somewhat worn.

"What is that?"

"Miss Knight's shoe—of a pair she is accustomed to slip on when in haste—and also obtained surreptitiously by Jane Gorgio."

"Well?"

"It fits the tell-tale footprint under the hazel-bush to perfection!"

"The print is still visible, then, after these miserable days?"

"Yes; I have taken care to shelter it from the weather. The footprint is still fresh, and will remain so. This shoe of Miss Knight's fits it absolutely!"

"A double proof, then, that Miss Knight was the witness of my brother's assassination—was, in fact, the owner of that scared face in the moonlight, whom you and John Thomas tracked to the house?"

"Exactly!"

"But what of that? We have surmised this much all along."

"But now we know it."

"She would still deny it, and you would believe her sincere in doing so, even in the face of this evidence."

"True; and there is where the mystification increases."

"I should say so!" with an impatient gesture. "Let us talk common-sense, Clew."

"With all my heart."

"You believe the young girl was present at the murder?"

"Yes; these proofs are incontestable."

"And you believe her sincere in declaring that she was not present?"

"Yes; and so would you if you had seen and heard her. Whatever the mother's duplicity and wickedness, the daughter's truthfulness is self-evident. It shines out of her like a lamp."

"That is not here nor there. How do you reconcile the contradiction, which is equally self-evident?"

"I don't attempt to, unless—"

"Might she have been present, and then forgotten it—as in, we will say, some sleep-walking trance?"

"That is just it. It has occurred to me that such might be the explanation, but I have hesi-

tated to say so, by reason of the strangeness of it all."

"Would it not be unprecedented?"

"I think not, though I am not sure. I must look up authorities."

"Strange, indeed, if it were so," murmured Mr. Lestrangle, musingly. "It seems to me I have heard or read of such a thing somewhere. I should like to see the girl, to judge for myself."

"That may be brought about sooner or later," and the detective, who had by this time put the shoe and handkerchiefs out of view, made a movement to rise.

"What is your next immediate step?" asked Mr. Lestrangle.

"To obtain an interview with Miss Knight, unknown to her mother, if possible."

"But you have thus far been baffled in that."

"This evening I may succeed. The dusk," with a glance out of the window, "is already falling. John Thomas is also promised a tryst with Jane Gorgio at this hour."

"I have seen that woman, but only to mistrust her."

"She is not to be trusted—that is, by us. Handsome, but treacherous! You have got the lady's-maid down pretty fine, sir. However, neither is your cockney valet any fool, though dead gone on the woman; and she may be managed to our advantage."

"Who is she?"

"An English Gypsy, or half-Gypsy, a sister of Jem Gorgio, one of the Black Star Gang's 'nasty men,' along with Cap Farnham, Cole Ashley, Flick Warner, Fireboy Peters and others; but a good-appearance, Jem is violently, though secretly, in love with the mysterious little angel, Miss Maggy Knight!"

And the Fighting Detective's redoubtable right hand clinched instinctively as he finished the characterization.

Without noticing the movement, Mr. Lestrangle looked at him admiringly.

"Gad! talk of getting 'em down fine," he chuckled, "it takes you for that, Clew! How do you manage it?"

"A matter of business, sir."

"I should say so! By 'nasty men,' I suppose you mean the men intrusted with the gang's menial work, such as murdering, stabbing in the dark, and so on?"

"Yes; they effect such 'removals' as may be determined on by the master-spirits."

Mr. Lestrangle's brow grew troubled and stern again.

"And those others—those master-spirits?" he queried.

"As I have told you before, sir, they consist of, first, One-Eyed Thompson and his clever pal, Bristol Bill, as ostensible chiefs; of Police Justice Dredger, Alderman Fake, Lawyer Isaac Bat, and Real Estate Dealer Tony Goebbing, as secret backers, or we shall say honorary members, and Mrs. Sylvia Knight, as fence or blind. There are doubtless others. The policy of the police authorities, which I represent, is to abstain from striking a blow until the entire gang can be secured, together with the necessary evidence to convict, root and branch."

Mr. Lestrangle sighed deeply.

"And I must wait till then before my brother's murder can be avenged! It is hard, but I suppose it is necessary. Good God! that such organized crime should exist in the present century, and in such a city as this!"

"It does seem hard, but let us hope that all will be for the best," said Captain Clew, encouragingly. "In the mean time, you are reasonably secured against any second attempt upon your own life. A shrewd stroke, that declaration of yours in the public prints, to the effect that any mortgage upon your property, presented in the event of your death, must of necessity be a forgery."

"Yes; I suppose so."

"Moreover, no claim has as yet been ventured against your brother's estate—proof enough that the villains are already alarmed as to possible consequences. Why, they hardly waited till after old Blank's funeral" (mentioning the name of a rich Harlem real-estate owner, who had been mysteriously murdered a year before) "before rushing to the front with their claims, and they secured the property, too."

"True. But then they've doubtless never tried to do up two of one family at one stroke before, as in our case. And besides, they can't be so seriously alarmed after all. This new case of my old friend, Mr. Arlington Dennett, would seem to prove that."

The detective rubbed his hands.

"Ah, but they are only beginning with him," said he. "You have conveyed due warning to Mr. Dennett?"

"Yes, as you requested."

"When shall you see him again?"

"At eight this evening. He is to be here by appointment."

"Shall I see him, too?"

"By all means. I was going to suggest it to you."

"Good! pray keep your visitor till my return, which shall be at the earliest moment. Wait. I shall first avail myself of your adjoining cabinet, according to our agreement."

The detective stepped into a small adjoining room, and presently reappeared entirely metamorphosed.

He had retired in his own unobtrusive but rather prepossessing character; he reappeared as an admirable combination of the Bowery heeler, fireman and rowdy of the period, not forgetting the soap-locks, the fore-tilt of the plug hat, the up-slant of the cigar from the protruding under-jaw, the trousers stuffed into the red-tipped boots, and the generally dare-devil and sooner-fight-than-eat swagger.

"You'll do, captain," commented Mr. Lestrangle, with an approving smile.

"Do I remind you," asked the detective, "of any one in particular?"

"Yes, and to a t—of that ruffian you pointed out to me the other day as Bunchy Fives, and a new recruit among the nasty men of the Black Star Gang."

"A good counterfeit, eh?"

"Perfect."

"Good! Henceforth, on occasion, I am Bunchy Fives."

"But your prototype—the real ruffian of that classic appellation?"

"He was privately arrested two hours ago for shoving the queer,* and will not reappear in public, save in this impersonation, until the Black Stars are in the clutch of the law."

"Capital! I understand."

"Au revoir, then!"

And the disguised detective forthwith set out upon his mission.

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE GRASS WIDOW'S GARDEN.

THERE stood in Brooklyn in those days, on the southeast corner of Hicks street and Fulton avenue, directly across the way from the Lestrangle homestead grounds, an old-fashioned hostelry and drinking-house of suspicious repute, kept by a retired English bruiser, one Burke Denham, and rejoicing in the designation, as illustrated by a creaking and suggestive signboard, of the Pig and Whistle.

To this resort our *pseudo* Bunchy Fives first made his way, after secretly quitting the homestead grounds by a roundabout route.

"Evenin', alderman!" said he, respectfully addressing a paunchy, loudly-dressed man, who was lounging with a vulgar air of self-importance before the tap-room door. "Mr. Thompson told me to see you about my initiation."

Mr. Alderman Fake nodded, somewhat loftily.

"There's no hurry about that, Bunchy," said he. "You're still on probation, you know, and One-Eyed Thompson ought to know it, too."

"The thunder!" burst out the pretended rowdy, with characteristic impatience. "Well, don't you fergit to know, Tom Fake, that I'm one of the b'boys that keep you in office at the New York City Hall!"

"Why, who pretends to forget it, Bunchy?" said the politician, with a surprising change of tone and manner.

"Don't try on your high-and-mighty airs with me, then, blast your mug!" growled the other, expectorating with a grand air. "I run with the Bloody Sixth, with fifty heelers at my back, I do, and don't you forget it."

"But I'm not forgetting it, Bunchy. Look here!" with a deprecating touch, and a lowering of the voice. "The Black Stars are on an outside racket, and a devilish ticklish one at that. You must recognize this, Bunchy."

"Mebbe I do. But I'm Big Injun enough for even the Black Stars any day or night in the week."

"No, you're not—not till you're proven worthy. The secrecy of the Gang is a life-and-death one, and you can only be admitted into it after the regular probation. Either Bristol Bill or One-Eyed Thompson could have told you that."

"Rot all that, alderman! I'm broke all the time nowadays, and I want work!"

"You'll have to be patient, Bunchy."

"Lend me five dollars, then."

The amount was rather reluctantly produced, and handed over, in single bills, which were eagerly scrutinized, one by one, in the dim light by the recipient.

"Good enough!" commented the latter, coolly pocketing the bills, without a word of thanks.

"You see, I can't afford to have any of the queer on me now."

"You're being spotted, eh?"

"Yes; especially by that lynx-eyed devil of a detective, Captain Clew. But he sha'n't have occasion to trip me with the queer in my possession. By the way, alderman, how long is my probation to last?"

"I don't know. It will be decided, I suppose, at the Gang's next regular communication."

"When is that?"

"To-morrow night."

"Suppose I should give you a pointer just now—to prove my being fly and worthy, you know?"

"Do so, Bunchy."

* "Shoving the queer," passing counterfeit money.

"Aren't you, or rather the Gang, getting ready to pipe off a new bird up yonder on the Heights—a party by the name of Dennett?"

"Yes!" cautiously, after a long pause, accompanied by a searching stare.

"Well, he'll visit Mr. Lestrangle, right across the way, at eight this evening!"

The alderman looked surprised.

"How did you learn this?" he demanded.

"That's my business. But doesn't it prove me the least bit fly, Tom Fake?"

"Yes; provided your words are borne out by facts."

"Wait here, and you'll see."

"I shall do so. Good-night, Bunchy. You are progressing, and I shall not fail to recommend you."

"Bunchy" did not fail to sponge a drink and a fresh cigar at the alderman's expense in the adjoining bar-room, after the most approved political tactics of the day, and then condescended to take himself off.

It was almost but not quite dark when he contrived to secretly introduce himself into the grass-widow's house-grounds, a few minutes later, and set out upon a stealthy tour of observation around the neglected house.

This was by no means the first of such tours of observation on the part of the detective.

First, he noticed quitting the house by a back door a woman whom he recognized as an honest person of the neighborhood, employed by the widow as a cook and house-servant during the day.

Several of the windows, below and above, were lighted.

The detective stationed himself in the shrubbery, at a point more or less commanding the various entrances.

Soon after the cook had disappeared, the front door opened, the figures of a man and woman appeared on the piazza; there was a sound suspiciously like that of a parting kiss being exchanged; after which, the woman softly reëntered the house, closing the door, while the man, whom the watcher recognized as none other than One-Eyed Thompson, hurriedly took himself off through the garden.

He had not been gone many minutes before a taller and somewhat shapelier man slipped in at the gate, circumspectly approached the house, mounted the porch steps and sounded the old-fashioned bronze knocker with a peculiar succession of raps.

"Aha, a signal!" thought the concealed observer. "Well, now that Thompson has been kissed and sent on his way rejoicing, let us see what sort of reception is in store for Captain Farnham, or Lover No. 2."

The question was left in doubt but for a moment.

The door again opened, cautiously at first, then wider, and then a jeweled hand, trembling in its eagerness, grasped the new-comer's extended palm, and both vanished into the interior with a sort of joyous gasp.

"Rather a free school of morality for our demure little Miss Maggy!" commented the detective again; "though, please God, she may be ignorant of it all."

He was drawing a little closer to the house, when a man approached the side-door which opened at his secret signal—a low whistle—and he was joined by a woman.

It was light enough for Clew to recognize the pair as the handsome Gypsy girl, Jane Gorgio, and her brother Jem.

They were conversing in low but angry tones as they sauntered by, close to his hiding-place.

"I tell you no, no, no!" Jane was impatiently saying. "The idea of our young lady giving a thought to the likes of *you*, letting alone making an appointment with you through me! Bah!"

Here they came to a momentary pause, and Clew was able to overhear quite distinctly.

"The mother's one of us, if the girl isn't," returned the man, sulkily. "And I'm as good as the rest that hang about this Satan's roost, I fancy."

"There's none of you good enough for *her*, and that settles it. Pah! the thought of it makes me sick!"

"But, Romany man that I be, I'm not so ill-favored, Janey; and you might just insinuate how crazily in love with her I am."

"Yes; and scare the poor child to death, into the bargain. It's No now, Jem, and it will always be No to that so long as I am around to protect her."

"But why?" with an oath. "Innocent and sweet as she is, she can't suspect the Gang's real business, and she'll never have a chance outside of our sort."

"Won't she? That's all you know about it."

He clutched her wrists fiercely.

"Speak out, you cat, or I'll twist your neck!"

he growled. "What d'ye mean?"

"Nothing!" And, though evidently frightened, she released herself by a sudden wrench.

"What did ye mean, I say? Is there another one?"

"Not that I know of. Don't be a fool, Gypsy Jem!"

"What did you mean, then?"

"Well, my young lady hasn't been the same since—since the next door affair."

"Ha! And since the Fighting Detective's visit here that same night? Is that it?"

"Yes, that is it!"

There was a harsh sound of the gritting of teeth on edge.

"Ha! Could our pretty Miss Innocence have taken a shine to *him*?"

"How should I know? But, she has been dreamier than her wont since then, and she has more than once defended Clew warmly when her mother has spoken harshly of his intermeddling."

There was a long pause, after which the man spoke, with collected sternness.

"Hark ye, Janey!" said he. "Sooner or later, the missus has got to speak up for me with the daughter."

"You say so, Jem."

"I tell you, she's got to!" fiercely. "She is having her own private swing, and welcome, be it with Thompson or Farnham—and who cares?—but, as one of the Black Stars, with her life at my tongue's end, she *daren't* refuse me! She can't help herself."

"Can't she?" derisively. "The idea of Sylvia Knight dreading the likes of you—a cheap stabber and a Gorgio!"

"Oh, you may sneer! But Sylvia, for all that her mother was our tribe's own queen, is no more pure Gypsy than you or I."

"What of that? Don't be a fool!"

"Fool yourself, Janey! But a written word from me might bring back Knight, her husband—she knows and fears *his* temper, if naught else—from the French penal colony as a ghost to trouble her new joy, free-footed as she reels herself, and she *knows* it. Gad! not the wraith of her brother, George Disbrow, itself, from its bloody grave, could more disturb my lady's fine new humors than Tatterdemalion Bill Knight with an empty purse and old scores to rub out!"

"Hush!" and there was a sudden terror in the young woman's voice. "You wouldn't do it, Jem—you wouldn't dare to! And, as for Knight—would he, even if free of his ball and chain, dare venture here, even for revenge, with the Black Stars still sore over his attempted treachery in the French trial? Come along; we are too near the house."

"Peste! You'd get rid of me, you jade, that you may get fresh speech with the cockney fellow that's tagging after you of late."

But he, nevertheless, moved off with her, and her reply was inaudible.

The detective was filled with contending emotions at what he had overheard.

But his indignation over Jem Gorgio's presumption was outweighed by the possibility of Maggy Knight entertaining a favorable impression of himself.

He followed the brother and sister until assured that they had quitted the grounds, and then returned to the vicinity of the house.

He had hardly resumed his station near the side-door when a graceful figure, that could belong to none but the fair and mysterious Maggy, slipped silently out of it.

The detective had determined to speak at length with her, and here, apparently, was his opportunity.

Recollecting his disguise, as one that would possibly occasion her some alarm, he proceeded to make certain changes therein with swift, expert movements in the dark.

In a moment his soap-locks and other rowdy characteristics had been modified.

Then, with his stove-pipe hat under his arm, and his features restored to something of their original modesty and good-looks, he was about to step out into the lesser obscurity of her surroundings and introduce himself, when he perceived that she was evidently bent upon some secret errand, and resolved to wait.

A crumpled paper was in the young girl's hand, and her charming head was bent in a listening attitude.

How enchanting and yet how mournfully pensive she looked, there in the dim, uncertain light!

Richard Clew was perhaps ordinarily less susceptible to feminine attractions than the sternest and most adamant of his guild; but never, since his first impression of this fair, mysterious young creature, had her pure image been absent from his thoughts.

Crime-girt, and yet so guileless, mothered by guile, and yet so innocent, whatever the circumstantial environments of the sweet, pure flower, its innate divinity and angelhood had penetrated to the inmost recesses of his world-tried, battlemented heart, where brooding Pity had already given birth to the swift, all-engrossing Love, unquenchable on earth, immortal in the heavens.

Presently there was a faint, whistling call, systematically repeated, from the direction of the river.

The young girl started, hesitated, and then, drawing her light, fleecy wrap closer about her exquisite form, struck off back through the

* Gorgio, a Romany designation, in a general sense, for one not a Gypsy.

neglected walks in obedience to the signal, with rapid, and yet, or so it seemed to the detective who shadowed her, with fearful and reluctant steps.

As he halted under the river-skirting trees, he saw her run down the open turf bank, here comparatively lighted up by the starshine and the reflected shimmer of the wave, toward a man who had just stepped out of a small boat, which he was making fast.

The appearance of this man, as he came eagerly forward with outstretched hands, at once recalled to the detective the expression, "Tatterdemalion Bill Knight," as used a few moments before by the Gypsy, Gorgio, in reference to M. s. Knight's criminal husband.

"O-ho!" he muttered, "a tatterdemalion, indeed, and doubtless the ex convict himself, back again as a marplot of our grass-widow's schemes, and even without Gypsy Jem's threatened intervention! But, pah! that fellow as Miss Maggy's father!"

He turned away his head, but not without seeing the young girl submit passively, though with a sort of shudder, to the ragged ruffian's embrace, which had something both timid and paternal in it.

Then, while debating within himself whether to retreat or draw nearer, the question was solved for him by the couple themselves approaching close under the trees, so that he could not choose but overhear or betray his presence by attempting to shrink away unperceived, which would have been no easy task.

CHAPTER VIII.

MAGGY.

"THERE! it will be better here, sir," said the girl. "There is less risk of detection than out there on the shore."

She was very pale, but composed.

"Sylvia doesn't guess of my return to these shores?"

"Of course not; else I should doubtless not be here. No one knows of my receiving your note."

The man drew a long breath, as of deep relief. His face, covered with a straggling, unkempt beard, was painfully emaciated, and might once have been nobly-featured, but for the hang-dog air and a most villainous and skulking expression.

"Thank the Lord for that!" said he. "But you, child, did not desert or give me over to vengeance, as she would have done."

"Oh, perhaps not—do not say that!"

"But I will say that, for it is true. Curse her, curse her!"

"You must not curse my mother, sir."

"Your mother?"

"Why, yes! What do you mean, father?"

"Nothing, nothing! Of course she's your mother, as I am your father, Mag. Of course, of course!"

The listening detective had experienced a joyous thrill. What if the Knights were *not* the young girl's real parents, after all? There was a pleasurable inspiration in the mere thought!

"Why are you here, sir?" asked Maggy, after an embarrassed pause. "I do not understand your presence, when you hint of so much danger from my mother's strange associates."

He gave her a searching glance.

"Strange associates" is good!" said he, with a sneer. "You don't suspect their real character, then? But no; how *can* you, with that purity still so luminous upon your young brow? Of course not; but, good Lord, what a deep one she is, that precious mother of yours!"

The trouble and anxiety had deepened in the young girl's face.

"I shall not try to guess the meaning of your hints, father—I dare not do so," she said, in a low voice. "I have long feared that my mother is engaged in dangerous and perhaps unlawful intrigues. It is here as it was in England, in France—as it has always been. We seem to live in mysterious seclusion, watchfulness and dread. Strange men come and go. Mr. Cooper and Mr. Thompson, of course, I do not fear; they have been mamma's confidential advisers for so long—almost from my earliest remembrance. But there are others whose sinister looks frighten me. It has always been thus. In vain does mamma continue to hint of important political complications, in answer to my occasional questions or prayers. It no longer satisfies me as it did. I fear—I fear, and am full of trouble and dismay!"

Her visible listener, no less than the concealed detective had marked her self-communing words, the former with chuckling contempt, the latter with eagerness and hope.

"Political complications!" burst forth the tatterdemalion, with a harsh laugh. "Ha, ha, ha! Oh, she's a deep one, is Sylvia! and you're a daisy, Mag—a daisy, with the dew yet on!"

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing—of course! But tell me: Bristol—I mean Mr. Cooper and Mr. Thompson—they're still confidential and advisory, eh?"

Mag looked puzzled.

"They remain my mother's most trusted friends, sir," she replied, with a naïve dignity,

that would have become Miranda on her island, ill-favored Caliban and the voices in the air.

ha! And Gypsy Jane is also mute, and the sinister strange men still come and go, eh?"

"Yes, sir," with renewed anxiety.

"Ah, indeed! Ha, ha, ha! And the political complications, eh? Ha, ha, ha! Ho, ho, ho!" And, as well as such a scare-crow could, the tatterdemalion went into an ecstasy of sarcastic merriment.

"Sir, you are merry," said Miss Maggy, gravely.

"I should say so, and with reason. But, tell me, Mag, how do the political complications pan out? Any mysterious murders, for instance, and perhaps not far away?"

The girl blanched.

"Heavens, yes!" she gasped. "At least there was one, a dreadful one directly adjoining our grounds. But, of course, that had nothing to do with my mother and her friends."

"Oh, no; of course not! I don't know what it was, but of course they were innocent as babes. Ha, ha, ha!"

"What do you mean, sir?" she stamped her little foot. "I insist on knowing the drift of your insinuations!"

He shook his head mockingly.

"You'll find out soon enough, my dear. Innocent as you are, it's a wonder you've remained blind to it this long."

"Won't you tell me?"

"Not I."

She controlled herself to calmness.

"Why are you here? You haven't answered my first question yet."

"Why am I here?" he burst out. "Ain't I your dad, you minx?"

"I suppose so," with an involuntary shudder. "I don't remember any other."

"I should say not! And yet, you ask me why I am here! Don't you know that I was transported to the furnace-coast of French Guiana by the treachery of your mother and her set?"

"No, I don't know that, father; though I have always understood that—that you were very wicked and criminal."

"Oh, indeed!" and the fellow lashed himself into a rage. "And why don't you know that I owed my transportation to them, when I tell you it was so?"

"Because, in that case, it would be my mother and her friends who would dread to meet you, while now—well, now it seems just the reverse."

He paled afresh, and looked about him uneasily.

"You're sure that—that my secret is safe, Mag?—that no one else has a suspicion of my return?"

"Perfectly sure, father, so far as my own fidelity is concerned. But, you are not safe for a moment here. There are rough men often lurking hereabouts at all hours. My mother says they are political conspirators, and I know that they never offer me harm or insult. But with you it might be different."

"What the devil!" he exclaimed, with increased agitation. "I should say so!"

"Look here, father. I judge that you are freshly escaped to America, and are destitute. Is that it?"

"Yes, yes; and who was left for me to apply to, Mag—you, my own flesh and blood?"

"Don't allude to that again, please!" and she shuddered again. "Here!" she passed him a roll of paper money, which he eagerly clutched; "I divided how it would be and brought you this. It is not much—only fifty dollars—but it is my all—my entire savings for the past year or two out of what mamma allows me. Take it, and welcome, father, but go, and go quickly!"

"Yes, my dear child, but—"

"Delay not, but dispatch!" and she feverishly pushed him, as he hesitatingly moved toward the boat. "I tell you, there is danger! My mother hates you, and her agents and friends—"

But by this time he was on a dead run for the boat, and she gave a relieved sigh, while watching his retreat with continued suspense.

But the warning had been heeded too late!

Midway to the boat the fugitive was intercepted by two powerfully-built, masked men, who sprung out from a clump of bushes, and fell upon him.

He made a frantic resistance, but only to be speedily overpowered.

A moment later he was lying gagged and bound in the boat, and the men, who had not spoken a word, were rowing away with him out over the silent waters.

The young girl had uttered a weak, unheeded scream, and then stood as though riveted to the ground.

"Ah! what will they do with him?" she murmured, clasping her hands. "Let me not forget that he is still my father."

"I don't know about that," said a soothing voice in her ear. "At least, let us hope that it may be otherwise."

Then as she turned, tottered, and would have fallen in her fresh panic, she was caught in the detective's strong arms.

"Fear nothing, Miss Knight; I am here as a

friend—a protector!" He had stepped back under the trees with her, and was looking anxiously in her face. "That is better; you are more composed already," and he gently released her. "Do you not recognize me? Pray, do not be frightened any more!"

"Thank you; I have got over it now." She drew a little away, and looked at him with comparative composure. "Yes; I recollect you. You are Captain Clew, the detective."

"True."

"And you are lurking secretly in our garden?"

"It is a place for more lurkers than one; and my profession demands it."

"Did you overhear what passed between me and my father?"

"Between you and that man—yes; though unintentionally."

"What did you mean by those first words with which you startled me?"

"I don't know exactly; I spoke on an uncontrollable impulse."

"Is he not really my father?"

"I—I hope not."

"Why should you hope or care?"

The detective hesitated, but it had become a case of now or never with him.

"It is because I love you!" he said, in deep, trembling tones. "Oh, start not or turn pale! I love, love, love you—I, who have never loved before—and I would live or die for you, as Fate shall decree!"

CHAPTER IX.

A DETECTIVE IN LOVE.

So sudden, so totally unexpected was the declaration, that the young girl had both started and turned pale.

But there was also a thrill and fervency in the unexpected words that had not been lost upon her, though her fair head was now drooping, her hands clasped nervously before her.

"Words of love, such words as these, to me—to me?" she murmured, in a hushed, awed voice.

"I dream, or there must be some mistake. I cannot believe it."

"Ah, they are wholly strange to you, then?" cried the detective, eagerly. "Such words have never been whispered to you before?"

"Never, never! I cannot believe them meant for me—for me, the child of loneliness, the victim of an unprecedented fate, the convict's daughter!"

The mournfulness of her words was indescribably pathetic.

Clew threw himself at her feet, and poured forth his love—the first love of his life, world-scarred though he was—in a river of burning words.

Strange! but, though the first spoken words confessing his passion had so startled her, the continuation of the fervid theme did not seem equally appalling.

She even turned her gaze upon him with a faint smile.

"I have only read of such things before," she said. "It still seems to me so strange, so unreal!"

"At least, say that I am not unpardonable—that you do not positively condemn or detest me!"

And, rising, he made captive of her trembling hand.

"I don't say that—at least, not exactly. But"—here she withdrew her hand—"this is preposterous! You have never seen me but once before—on that terrible, that fatal night."

"Yes, many times since, my beautiful one! but without your knowing it."

"Ah, very likely! It is your profession to thus lurk and spy—you yourself said it. How do I know but"—a sudden terror rushed into her face—"but this, too, may merely be in the line of your profession?"

She wished she had not said it, so hurt was the expression in the young man's face.

"I take that back!" said she, hurriedly. "I see, now, that is unjust; I feel quite sure that you couldn't be capable of that."

She held out her hand with enchanting frankness, but as quickly withdrew it on his making haste to cover it with kisses.

Then the detective lost no time in renewing his protestations, and even explained in general terms, and with certain important reservations, the object of his secret observations about the house.

She listened gravely, and with at least no outward manifestations of displeasure.

"Confess, at all events, sir," said she, at last, "that you didn't believe my assertions of denial on that unceremonious visit of yours to my mother."

"I shall do nothing of the kind," he stoutly replied. "I believe you incapable of an untruth."

"And yet you persisted that you identified me with the mysterious fugitive—the presumed witness of that horrible crime?"

"I must still persist in that—I simply can't help it."

"But if I were she, how could my denial be truthful?"

"In only one way, that I can see."

"What way is that?"

"On the ground that you were a witness of the crime without remembering it."

"I fail to understand you."

"On the ground that you are a somnambulist—a sleep-walker."

Miss Knight looked astounded.

"Could it have been? could it have been?" she repeated, half to herself. "Ha! the dream—the dream?"

"Speak frankly, I beg of you!" exclaimed the detective, eagerly. "Are you addicted to the sleep-walking habit?"

"Yes," reluctantly. "That is, I was as a child, but thought to have long since outgrown it."

"And was there a dream in connection with that night—that crime?"

"No—yes—I fear so, but am uncertain—all is misty now. But, if there was, it will sooner or later recur to me in all the vividness of detail."

"Was it thus with you in what you recall of the childish habit?"

"Yes; there would be no recollection for weeks, sometimes for months. Then the whole vision, in connection with the somnambulism, would burst upon me like a vision, or a remembered clairvoyance."

"Splendid!" cried Clew, exultingly. "Oh, we'll get there at last!"

"What do you mean?"

"Excuse me, young lady, if my professional zeal runs away with me. I mean that, when the vision of that night returns to you, the assassins of Mr. Louis LeStrange will be identified!"

She drew back in a sort of fear.

"You think so—you think I was really an unconscious witness of the crime?"

"Oh, I knew that before."

"How did you know it, other than by the glimpse of my face, which you fancy you obtained?"

He produced the shoe and the telltale handkerchief—being careful, with no little inward shame and embarrassment, to keep the companion handkerchief out of sight.

"Examine these articles, pray. Are they not your property?"

"Both, most certainly. The handkerchief, especially, I have missed for a number of days."

He told her of his finding both handkerchief and footprint.

"Wonderful! Yes; there can no longer be a doubt. I must have been a witness in my sleep. But I don't remember to have missed the shoe, likewise. However, it may well have been, as I so seldom wear of late the pair to which it belongs. Ah! but this is strange and terrible."

The detective was thus spared the humiliation of confessing to the surreptitious means by which he had obtained the shoe, no less than the companion kerchief.

"Have I your permission to retain these articles?" he asked.

"Certainly; they are silent witnesses in evidence, even as against my own infirmity, now." Then, as he put them out of sight: "Who do you expect to incriminate, should I prove available?" she added, with some very natural anxiety.

He hesitated.

"You—you will respect the confidence that I may repose in you?"

For answer she laid her hand in his. Then, though blushing painfully, she did not withdraw it instantly, even when he raised it to his lips, while sending an adoring look down into the depths of her beautiful eyes ere she could veil them modestly beneath the downcast lids.

Thus, in view of what had previously passed—his passionate avowals—it was a pledge of perhaps something more than secrecy, and he was too prudent to push the advantage further, then and there.

"Hereafter I shall trust you absolutely," said he. "I expect to incriminate certain infamous human instruments, and, through them, a band organization for robbery and murder, such as can hardly be paralleled in the present age."

And the while she hearkened with staring eyes and blanching cheeks, he imparted to her in a low voice much that he both knew and suspected of the Black Star Gang.

Then a new and yet more powerful fear seemed to seize upon the young girl.

"Tell me," she faltered, "can my—my mother be implicated with this awful band?"

Clew remained silent.

"Ah, this is dreadful! But wait." She seemed to recover her fortitude and self-control by a great effort. "Remember, sir, you were to repose absolute confidence in me."

"I do not forget that."

"Then answer me frankly." She compressed her lips hard. "Can my mother be associated with these appalling criminals?"

"The woman reputed as your mother—the woman, Mrs. Knight, is so associated, I firmly believe."

She had caught at his words wildly, with something like a new hope.

"Ha! Is she not really my mother, then? Tell me what you know, or even what you guess."

"My poor child! I know nothing, but can

conjecture much. Tell me, first, do you not have a true daughterly feeling for your—your reputed mother?"

"I don't know. Sometimes—"

"Is the filial instinct ever lacking, or at fault?"

"Sometimes I think so, then again I am tormented with doubts and fears. At times she fills me with horror and dread—a nameless repugnance. Then again, her capricious tenderness, though with something desperate in its nature, will win upon me. It has always been thus ever since I can remember. Besides, Jane Gorgio and she have always shared secrets apart from me—secrets that I could see they dreaded my discovering—though whether bearing upon my history or not I never could determine. Then the man whom I can only remember to have addressed as father—the miserable man of to-night's adventure—somehow he never acted as a parent should, even when the pair were living amicably together abroad."

"Your home was always with them, so far as you can remember?"

"Yes—such a home as it was! Oh! we were everywhere—from one corner of Europe to another—never in one place more than a twelve-month, to the best of my recollection. And always with dreadful, sinister and mysterious men going and coming, flitting and reappearing. It has been even worse in that respect since my father suddenly disappeared from us in Paris, shortly before our coming to this country several years ago. I suppose, from what he said to-night, it must have been then that he was convicted and transported. Home! Oh! with a passionate gesture; "I have never had a home any more than the rolling stone or the wandering wave. Even the education I have achieved has been by scraps, from this or that hastily-engaged, charily-paid tutor here and there, though I have picked up many languages. Home! I have never had a home—I have never had a friend!"

Her dejection was indescribably piteous, with a sort of agony in it.

The next instant the detective had caught her to his breast.

"Say not so!" he exclaimed. "Henceforth you have a friend, a lover, a worshiper to all eternity!"

What was this?

Yes; she was lying quietly, passively in his strong embrace.

CHAPTER X. MAGGY'S STORY.

BUT it was only for an instant.

Poor Maggy! poor, beautiful and maidenly waif upon the driving waves of calamity and circumstance!

Up to this time her affectional nature had been an empty waste. Save in vague dreams or uncomprehended longings, she had never known manly sympathy before, or listened to the passionate avowals without which womanly existence is so incomplete, and indeed scarcely begun.

Was it a wonder or a fault that she passively resigned herself to the new happiness, the restfulness, the sense of security, of that strong and honest and adoring embrace?

Come and gone!

Then she was herself again, her former shrinking self, dissevered from that loving clasp, but with downcast eyes, nervously-intertwining fingers, and the new, sweet tumult within her theretofore unconquered, all-sequestered heart.

"It isn't right!" she faltered. "You must not—not ever again—that is— Oh, we scarcely know one another as yet!" and she hid her blushing face within her trembling hands. "Besides— Ah, God!" Then there was a sorrowful, a suddenly-terrified sigh.

Ecstatic with his new, half-hoped-for bliss, the detective had, nevertheless, forced himself to composure, in view of the young girl's unprotected or at least unguarded position.

"You are right, Maggy," said he, gravely. "Never again—until we shall know each other better—until you can come to trust me absolutely. Till then, you are as a dearest sister—or I will try to think of you as such. But, what were you about to add? Whence the source of that sudden sigh?"

"Ah! can you not understand? You are evidently so honorable, so noble—a true man—and if they are really my parents? If I should really have been born, as I have been reared and bred, in an atmosphere of outlawry and criminality?"

"Say no more!" he exclaimed, as she came to another of the shuddering pauses which he had found so piteous. "Even then it would make no difference in my love and devotion for you, my poor darling! Nay, if anything, it would, I think, increase my determination to clutch you away from these life-long, these poisonous and deadly entanglements, unto my beating heart, my protection and my love. But it cannot be so. I feel instinctively that the Knights are not your real parents."

"Heaven grant it! But what makes you think so?"

"Well, in the first place, you favor neither one of them in your person."

"Ah!" she clasped her hands; "I have thought of that. And once, I remember, as a child, when Jane Gorgio somehow alluded to my utter lack of family resemblance, my mamma—that is, Mrs. Knight—was very angry, and rebuked her harshly."

"And no wonder! Why, you have not a single feature or characteristic trait in common with theirs! The man, whom I scanned for the first time to-night, is simply out of the question. While, as for the woman, the *pseudo* widow, attractive in person as she still remains, you show not the ghost of a transmission from her, though you are of the same olive complexion. As well connect by family ties the moss-rosebud of our Northern nooks with the blood-red trumpet-flower of a tropic swamp!"

"Oh, do you think so? And as for our similarity of complexion—but no, I must not speak further. I am bound—oath-bound!"

And she pressed her fingers over her lips.

"Oath-bound?"

And he was eying her with a devouring curiosity.

"Yes; absolutely!"

"No more on that point, then!" with a dismissive gesture. "But don't you recognize the dissimilarity, the alien characteristics, for which I have contended?"

"Ah, yes; that is, I would like to accept the same view. But to what end?"

"Why, to the end that you are doubtless not their child, but of some other parentage; perhaps a stolen child?"

"Or perhaps a child by gift—a disowned waif. Well," mournfully, "even that might be better. It could scarcely be worse."

And the slow tears began to well in the dark, sad eyes.

"Do not be unhappy! As you say, my dear child, it could not be worse, and it may be infinitely better. Who knows? But, tell me; you have no memento, not even the faintest, vaguest recollection, of another and different past?"

"No, not one; not the faintest."

And she shook her head regretfully.

"The Gypsy woman, Jane Gorgio, how long has she been with Mrs. Knight?"

"Longer than I can remember. She is eight or ten years my senior, and was something of a nurse to me."

"Also something of a *confidante*, or privileged character, to her mistress, eh?"

"Yes."

"Do they ever clash?"

"Sometimes, but rarely. Each has come to respect the other's temper, which is a high one, and, on provocation, dangerous."

"Ah! I suppose you know that Jane Gorgio has a brother?"

"Know it? I hate that man—hate and fear him!"

"May I ask why?"

"I would rather not say. Or, yes; he once tried to be agreeable to me, and I made Jane turn him out of the kitchen. That was all."

The detective's brow had darkened.

"Did Jane's brother come to visit her in the old country, too?"

"No; only since we have been here. I rather suspect (now that I am beginning to see things more clearly, more terribly) that most of his life has been passed in prisons and penal settlements."

"Most likely. Of the strange men who are given to haunting these premises, which ones were familiar with Mrs. Knight's odd household abroad?"

"Only Mr. Thompson and Mr. Cooper. These baser ones, as you might call them—mostly Americans, I think—began to collect around us, one by one, after our arrival in this country."

"But you had their prototypes abroad, I suppose?"

"Yes, I think so," after a troubled pause.

"In France, for instance—which I am best able to remember—there were just such mysterious, silent, sinister-looking hangers on. For we lived secluded just out of Paris, as we do here in the suburbs of New York. They were a motley set—French, English, Germans, Italians and others. That is, the commoner ones were. But we had our really stylish visitors there, as we have Mr. Bat, Mr. Dredger, Mr. Fake and Mr. Goebing here, and they were all thorough Parisians."

"Poor child!"

"I think it was a secret conspiracy against the Government, or something of the sort. Or so I was given to understand. Then came a sudden alarm. Mr. Thompson and Mr. Cooper hurried mamma, Jane and me, with such clothing and valuables as we could hastily snatch together, into some carriages that were waiting for us at the back of the gloomy gardens surrounding the old house in which we lived. As we drove away there was a sound of shots and cries behind, and Mr. Cooper said in my hearing, but with a smiling look at mamma:

"The Government has got the best of our poor little revolution, after all."

"Then she smiled, too. But I afterward learned, when we were safe in England, that it was only the gendarmes who had made the descent; and when I told Jane what Mr. Cooper had said about the 'revolution' I thought she

would die of laughing, though she would not tell me what she was so merry over. But I soon found out somehow for myself, though care was taken to keep the French newspapers out of my way, that something more dreadful than the squelching of a political conspiracy must have taken place, though exactly what I could not discover, and that papa, or the man I had been taught to call papa, and several others had been left behind in prison, to answer the consequences of some terrible exposure."

"Poor child!" repeated the detective, as the girl again came to a pause.

"We did not stay long in England that time," she resumed, "and for a while we were very poor and in miserable straits while there. Mamma still held to the revolution subterfuge, or whatever it was. And once, when I childishly asked for an explanation of our changed circumstances, she said that we were hiding away from the emissaries of the French Government, and that my papa had proved a traitor to the patriot cause, though without saving benefit to himself, and that I must never mention his name, under pain of her unspeakable displeasure."

"But after that, shortly before our leaving for America, I surprised her in confidential talk with Mr. Thompson and Mr. Cooper. And before they were aware of my presence I heard Mr. Cooper say: 'Don't be alarmed, Sylvia. We'll have a fine, untrodden field for our French racket in and around New York, and will soon be rolling in money again. I've worked the Americans, and ought to know.' 'Right you are, Bill!' interposed Mr. Thompson. 'They're ripe for it. Only caution and some steady pipe-laying, and the Black Stars will sparkle as brightly there as elsewhere, and with more safety, too.'"

"Then they saw me, and were suddenly silent, while mamma looked embarrassed, and said something about the risk of importing old-world revolutionary and political ideas into a new country."

"Don't speak of that woman as your mamma again!" exclaimed Clew, indignantly. "It is horrible! Heavens! so the present infernal scheme of the gang is an importation? I might have suspected as much, but—"

She suddenly clung to his side, and a dark figure was seen to start up from among the shadows and steal silently away.

"Ah! we were spied upon—perhaps overheard!" gasped the young girl. "Quick; let me go! I must hurry back."

"Wait! not alone?"

"Yes, yes!"

"When shall you meet me again?"

"To-morrow evening at this hour. Oh, that will do! Good-night, my friend—my dear friend, and may God preserve you!"

Then she was gone.

CHAPTER XI.

THE FIGHTING DETECTIVE AT WORK.

IT had been an evening of such surprises that the old garden seemed almost like one enchanted, and the detective's mind was in a momentary whirl.

The young, the beautiful, the innocent, the sorely-entangled child! and thenceforth his love, his life, his very own!

Spy-begirt, danger-beset as they had been, ought he to have permitted her flight back to the ill-omened house, even at the suggestion of prudence, unaccompanied?

He stepped out into a path leading back from the shore-strip, and strained his eyes to follow the fair fugitive form.

Yes; that was the shimmer and glimmer of her light-colored drapery. But what was this! The wearer had paused, partly retraced her course, and seemed even waiting for him.

As he darted forward, the figure darted into a side-path, and he followed on.

But, suddenly, at the hedge-boundary of the Lestrage estate, it mysteriously vanished, and he was at fault.

A suspicion for the first time possessed him that he was being duped, and then he remembered with a flash that he had neglected to resume the characteristics of his fictitious part, that of the Bowery heeler, which might have advantaged him so greatly in any pass.

Too late!

There was a mocking laugh from the point where the figure had faded away—he could have sworn that it was the laugh of Jane Gorgio, whose voice he was not unfamiliar with of late—and then he was silently, murderously beset by four masked ruffians suddenly springing out upon him, like magic, from among the black shadows.

But, despite the display of more than one ugly weapon, the detective, with a ripple of his low, significant laugh, sailed into his assailants with no other weapons on his own part than the invincible bunches of fives with which nature and science had so formidably provided him.

Bing! bang!

Hardly had a knife gleamed, a bludgeon waved, before he was here, there and everywhere among them, like a man on springs and with the electric fluid as his prompting force.

Noses were smashed, eyes battered, ears split,

tail but comparatively cumbrous forms sent reeling back, and still there was the thud, thud, thud! of the lightning-like, piston-rod fist-shots from the shoulder, with their agile deliverer dancing about like a veritable will-o'-the-wisp of pugilistic invincibility.

Still, the ruffians were presently reinforced by two others.

Then, notwithstanding that three of the original four were knocked down and out for the time being, the Fighting Detective was momentarily forced into a defensive attitude, with his back set against the hedge.

Here, nevertheless, by his science and address, he managed to keep the fellows at bay without any excessive difficulty, until an unforeseen accident intervened.

The hedge suddenly gave way, causing him to fall backward through it, and then, end over end, down the slight declivity, into the adjoining lot.

"Now give it to him without mercy!" growled the foremost assailant, with an exulting oath. "Fighter or no fighter, he's our meat!"

Pell-mell, the entire six—for the knocked out trio had by this time regained their feet—dashed upon him through the ragged gap.

But the accident proved to be a fortunate one for our detective, after all.

Dazed and fagged, he was scarcely on his feet again, and might have proved an easy prey at last, when the leading ruffian suddenly halted, and then staggered back.

"Holy blazes!" he gasped, in a panic-stricken voice; "this spot again, for all the world!"

And he sped back through the gap, as if fired out of a mortar.

"So it is!" faltered the masked man who had stood behind him. "The deuce!"

And he and his companions—the latter doubtless through sympathetic fear, rather than understandingly—lost no time in following their leader's example.

Clew was left alone!

A glance upon his surroundings satisfied him as to the cause of the panic that had so opportunely befriended him.

He was standing on the very spot, still trampled and upturned, upon which the unfortunate Louis Lestrangle had sunk down to rise no more under the murderous blows of his midnight assassins!

After a moment's reflection the detective decided not to seek his promised interview with Mr. Lestrangle and Mr. Dennett, without exploring the mysteries of the "widow's" garden yet more thoroughly.

He accordingly retired behind a clump, and when he reappeared it was in the resuscitated personality of Bunchy Fives, the Bowery aspirant for Black Star emoluments.

He swaggered back to the other side of the hedge, and soon met his recent assailants returning to the field, under the leadership of William Cooper, or Bristol Bill himself.

The latter had evidently been rating them on their superstitious cowardice in no measured terms.

"Who is this?" he exclaimed, on seeing the new-comer. "Why, hallo!" with genuine surprise; "it's Bunchy Fives. What brought you here, Bunchy?"

Bristol Bill—a fine-looking, powerfully-built gentleman-desperado, with singularly penetrating eyes—was, alone of his party, unmasked.

The spurious Bunchy set his hat and cigar at yet more rakish angles, and returned the searching gaze with one of equal independence.

"Private biz in de next shebang," he replied, with an l-run-wid-de-machine flourish. "Same to yourself, Bristol?"

Though not one of the initiated, Bunchy was known and respected by most of the secret Gang as a man of reckless courage and more or less ferocious temper.

"Oh! well, we're here also on a little private biz," was the retort.

After the exchange of a few more similar compliments, Bunchy condescended to explain that he had been reconnoitering in the adjoining grounds when the sound of something like a scrimmage had brought him to the immediate vicinity, but only to be disappointed.

"It was only my friends here," said the master ruffian, "having a shindig with Dick Clew, the Fighting Detective."

"O-ho!" with a contemptuous glance at the masked rank and file—whose faces he was bent on identifying for future convenience; "well, there's enough of 'em to have eaten him alive."

"But they didn't, owing, they tell me, to an unfortunate accident in his favor. You know the man?"

"I should say so. Who doesn't?"

"Seen anything of him?"

"Naw."

And Bunchy produced a large flat flask, which he uncorked, wiped off with his sleeve and tendered to the party.

"Off with them 'ere face-togs!" he growled, as the first of the maskers eagerly reached for the proffered nip as Bristol Bill smilingly declined the courtesy. "I'm in the habit of seeing a man's mug when I lush with him!"

The men forthwith unmasked, with more or less good-humor, and the flask circulated.

"Here's luck to all on us!" and the make-believe Bunchy finally finished it at a single pull.

"It's the first-chop Sixth Ward red-eye, an' don't you furgit it."

"You haven't told me of the nature of your call to this quiet and reposeful neighborhood?" suggested Cooper, with a smile.

"Why in thunder should I? However, I've already given the Alderman a pointer, and I'm looking out for fresh ones."

"On what?"

"Party by the name of Dennett."

Bristol Bill's eyes sparkled.

"Aha! but he isn't ripe yet," he soliloquized, in a low voice. "So, you are on that lay, are you, Bunchy?"

"I'm making it my lay. I say, Bristol, Fake tells me my name'll come up at to-morrow night's communication."

"I've heard something of it, Bunchy."

"You'll be for me, Bristol?"

Cooper's face had assumed a stern, non-committal air.

"From present indications, yes," he replied, slowly. "It isn't often that an up-and-up good man is black-balled."

The Bowery representative's face lighted up with a lurid look.

"Black-balled be hanged!" he growled. "They'd better not black-ball me!"

"Oh, there's probably no danger of it," returned the other, soothingly. "It's a mere matter of sufficient probation, you know."

"That be blowed! I'm as good as the best, and Fake knows it. If he doesn't know it, let him look out for his fur and feathers next Election day—which isn't so far off, nuther."

"Oh, with Fake for you, you've good enough backing, and I'll do my best. You'll be on hand, if called for?"

"Yes, if you think it worth while, Bristol. Where's it to be?"

Cooper was high in the counsels of the Black Stars. He paused, reflectively, and then, producing a card and pencil, he wrote a line or two in the darkness apparently with as much ease as if by a lantern's gleam.

"Here!" said he. "Be careful of this address; though, even if lost or mislaid, it wouldn't be much of a give-away."

The other took the card and nodded.

"Anything else?"

"No; good-night."

And the trusted of the Black Stars unceremoniously disappeared among the shrubbery and trees, his followers also fading away into the shadows without a word.

The pseudo fire-boy grunted, and, instead of repassing the hedge immediately, he observantly followed its line back from the water to the street-front.

Midway, however, he was arrested by the low murmur of voices, and presently espied two figures, a man and woman, whom he soon recognized as Janc Gorgio and John Thomas, Mr. Lestrangle's body-servant, in earnest conference in a convenient nook.

"The cockney is soft-spoken," thought the disguised detective, "dead in love, to boot, and the Gypsy woman is likewise a Britisher—better a friend than an enemy. I only hope she is equally susceptible."

He continued his stealthy course to the street-line, vaulted over the hedge, and then took up his position in the deep shadow of two ornamental fir-trees in the Lestrangle foreground, with the hospitable lights of the Pig and Whistle twinklingly visible across the roadway.

Here he sounded a peculiar call, like the triple-trill of a night-bird, for which it might have been readily mistaken.

A man of slouching figure and noiseless step appeared, of whom the reader has already had a cursory glimpse.

"So, Feeny, you're on hand?"

"Ain't I always, Mither Clew?"

"Yes; but you're sure you haven't been detected?"

"Dead sure, your Honor."

"You saw Farnham slip into the widow's on the heels of Thompson's departure?"

"I did."

"How long did he remain?"

"Twenty minutes."

"Whose turn next?"

"Bristol Bill's."

"How long?"

"The same time, sir, or until the widdy throttled Miss Maggy at the side-door."

"How?"

"The colleen came running back from the grounds, as if skeered. Her mother nabbed her at the side-door, and dragged her in, hissing like a snake. Bristol Bill stole away back three minutes later."

The detective reflected, his brows contracting, his hands clinching, instinctively.

"Our entire conversation was doubtless overheard and reported to the widow," he thought. "Unhappy Maggy! if I thought she were in danger of harsh treatment at that witch's hands—But no; she would not dare! That will do, Feeny," he continued, turning to his follower.

"Where is Danny Crook?"

"Within call, sir."

"Send him to me, and then you can go home."

I shall probably be at headquarters by daylight."

"Yes, sir."

Feeny was an ex-convict and a police spy, slavishly devoted to Clew personally.

He took himself off in a strangely drifting, phantom-like way, and the detective, who had by this time deprived himself of his more prominent Bunchy Fives characteristics and was once more recognizable in his true character, was, a moment later, joined by a wide-awake, unscrupulous-looking boy of fifteen, with the stature of a dwarf and the shoulder-breadth of a giant.

This was Danny Crook, also a trustworthy henchman of Clew's, though a young tough of the period, with the turbulent and erratic tendencies inherent in such a character.

The detective eyed him sternly.

"You failed to meet me at the ferry, as I ordered!"

The boy hung his head—dare-devil as he was, any reproof of the Fighting Detective's cut him like a knife.

"Deed, I couldn't help it, boss. De bells rung out an alarm for the third district, an' de Bloody Six machine was just tumblin' out, wid de rope only half manned, as I was on my way to de ferry."

"I'll overlook it this time, Danny. But be careful in the future."

"Deed I will, Cap."

"What was the fire?"

"A dry-goods palace in the third—a reg'lar gut, an' lots of fun for de boys."

"Did you see Bunchy Fives arrested in its neighborhood?"

"Yes."

"How was it effected?"

"Just as you ordered, Cap. Bunchy had sneaked into Moll Flannigan's for a drink, an' was in a dark corner wid his fire-hat off when de peelers pounced on him."

"It was done without attracting the other firemen's attention?"

"Not a soul the wiser save me an' Moll, an' she's an oyster. It was just a jump from den to close-coach, Cap, an' Bunchy was as good as jailed."

"Good! The Bunchy Fives that you may hereafter encounter will be me in disguise."

"I'm fly, Cap!"

"Watch these two garden-fronts for the remainder of the night. If you do not see me between-times, meet Feeny and me at headquarters by daybreak."

Danny ducked his head in acquiescence, and went rolling away with his Samson-like shoulders into the obscurity, like a sawed-off man-o'-war's-man with his first night on shore.

Clew then lost no further time in seeking Mr. Emil Lestrangle in the homestead library.

Mr. Arlington Dennett, the expected visitor—an aged but still vigorous gentleman, with miserly eyes, a covetous tightening of the lips, and his parchment-like face as generally expressive as an old pocket-book or a bag of money—was also present, and both gentlemen looked up a little anxiously as the detective entered.

CHAPTER XII.

DEEPENING MYSTERY.

"WHAT news?" asked Mr. Lestrangle, after introducing the detective to his visitor.

"All is going well," was the reply, and Clew made a sign to the effect that he would have much to impart to Mr. Lestrangle in private.

"My friend, Mr. Dennett," said the "count," is glad to know that I have interested you in his case, Captain Clew."

The detective bowed, while Mr. Dennett moved uneasily in his chair, opening and shutting his thin lips like a fly-trap or a patent child's savings bank.

"He is also aware that the first intimation of his danger came to me from you."

Mr. Dennett squirmed yet more uncomfortably.

"It's awful, the sensation of being marked by such a gang!" he squeaked. "Good God! when I think of my poor friend, Mr. Louis Lestrangle, and the fate that overtook him, the cold creeps run up and down my spine like icy snakes."

Clew had been taking the capitalist's measure at his leisure, and he now turned to him with much urbanity.

"It can't be very agreeable, sir," he admitted. "This may be called one of the discomforts of opulence."

"Y-e-es, I suppose so. Of course, I'm awfully obliged to you for your warning, sir. But how much is it going to cost me—your charges, you know—that's what I want to be clear about?"

The detective smiled.

"We shall see about that, Mr. Dennett. In the mean time, I shall have to ask you certain questions, necessary now, but which, under ordinary circumstances, might be considered impertinent."

"Oh, don't make any ceremony, captain," and Mr. Dennett nervously uncrossed his legs, only to cross them afresh. "I'd say at the start, though, that I'm not rich in ready money—land poor, as they say."

"I think I understand. Loaded down with

Brooklyn real-estate, and kept short by paying the taxes, eh?"

"Substantially that, sir," with a slight flush.

"Married or single?"

"I am a bachelor, sir."

"Any natural heirs, in case of sudden death?"

"I don't intend to die, sir; that is, not in a hurry."

"Ah! none of 'em do, Gang or no Gang."

Here the old fellow changed color perceptibly.

"Allow me to repeat my query—any natural heirs?"

"None but distant relatives, with whom I hold no communication."

"Then they wouldn't inherit?"

"Not a stiver!"

"Ah!" and Clew rubbed his hands in the smooth, bland way that he had. "My dear sir, you are just the sort that the Black Stars are looking and praying for."

Mr. Dennett fairly bounded in his chair.

"Goodness gracious, sir! do you really think so?"

"Quite sure of it. Any communications with a certain Mr. Goebeling, real-estate dealer, 77 Bowery, as yet?"

Mr. Dennett groaned.

"Mr. Lestrangle here has advised me as to that man's sinister character," said he. "I have received repeated communications from him of late, to which, however, I have paid no attention."

"Never vouchsafed him a line in reply, with your signature appended?"

"Never."

"That is fortunate—so far, at least. He is urgent, I presume, to negotiate for some special piece of property in your possession."

"May I ask the nature of your last communication from him?"

"You may. It came to hand this morning. He somewhat plaintively complains of my discourtesy in not replying to his former notes, and will take the liberty of calling upon me in person to-morrow, accompanied by his lawyer, the eminent Mr. Bat, as a voucher for his good faith."

Again the detective's hands smoothly rubbed one another.

"Excellent!" he murmured. "Couldn't be better! What hour will he call?"

"At four in the afternoon."

"Good! Receive him with reserve, but not with anger, sir. I shall assist you in the character of your new private secretary and confidential clerk—freshly engaged, but greatly trusted."

Mr. Dennett stared.

"It will be all right, Arlington," earnestly interposed Mr. Lestrangle. "The captain knows what he is about. Had my poor brother Louis had the good fortune to have him for an adviser, he would be alive at the present hour."

Mr. Dennett arose to go.

"I shall agree to anything, if but safety be secured," said he. "But wait; about those charges? You haven't told me what your services are going to cost me."

And he turned a little anxiously to the detective.

The latter, before answering, stole a glance toward Mr. Lestrangle, as if seeking for a pointer, but that gentleman—who, to tell the truth, was not a little ashamed of his fellow-land-owner's penuriousness—only evinced a mild expression of weariness and disgust.

"If, Mr. Dennett," said the detective, with great deliberation, "I fail to save you from the murderous intentions of the Gang—don't be alarmed; failure is not possible, save through intractableness or some other fault of your own—you will owe me nothing, and I shall expect nothing."

"I should think not! Come now, young man, that's reasonable."

"But if I succeed, to your complete satisfaction, which will also include the wholesale exposure of the Gang, root and branch, and their delivery up to justice, I shall expect at your hands, sir—"

Mr. Dennett's miserly little eyes grew positively frightened, and he grasped the head of his walking-stick with both hands.

"Twenty thousand dollars in cash, or its equivalent in such salable land as I shall select out of your vast unimproved property."

Mr. Dennett gave an hysterical squeak, and staggered back as if suddenly confronted by irretrievable financial ruin.

"Great Julius Caesar!" he gasped, "do you take me for a John Jacob Astor, or the possessor of Aladdin's wonderful lamp?"

The detective turned with cool abruptness.

"If you choose, sir," said he, "we will confine ourselves to the discussion of our private affair. Our friend here evidently holds his life and estate at a trifling cost—and I own that my professional price is a smart one."

But just here Mr. Dennett, who was thoroughly terrified, began to temporize, though at a hard and squirming wrench; and he was not long, under the additional stimulus of Mr. Lestrangle's counsel, in agreeing to the detective's terms.

Then arose an additional difficulty, of a more personal nature, however. The land-poor rich

man's nerves had been so unstrung that he feared a Black Star assassin in every bush, and he was afraid to go home, though the distance to his house at the top of the hill—the present Brooklyn Heights—was but a few rods.

This difficulty was obviated by the timely arrival of John Thomas, who was instructed to serve the old gentleman as a convoy, and then return.

"Well, captain," said Mr. Lestrangle, when alone with the detective, "I divine that you have much to tell me, and I am impatient for the recital."

"Tell me first, if you please, was I too hard on your worthy old friend, in your opinion?"

"Worthy old fiddlesticks! Dennett was rather my father's friend than mine, and his worship of the dollar—or its real estate equivalent—is simply painful. Your demand was by no means excessive, everything considered, in the life-and-death service to be rendered, and I'll see that he lives up to his agreement. As between us two, your requital at my hands shall be even better to your liking."

"No more, I beg of you," and then the detective related in detail his adventures in the widow's garden.

"These are astonishing experiences!" exclaimed the count, when he had heard the last of it. "What are your deductions from all that you have discovered?"

"I shall know better after I shall have been initiated into the Black Star membership to-morrow night, as I mean to be."

And the detective consulted the address given to him by William Cooper, otherwise Bristol Bill.

"No. 21 Cherry street, north side, 10 o'clock, wait on sidewalk till you are Starred."

Such was its purport.

"What does 'wait till you are Starred' mean?" asked Mr. Lestrangle, also glancing at the address.

"You're asking me too much," and the detective returned the card to his pocket. "I suppose I shall find out in the course of time."

Mr. Lestrangle grew uneasy.

"The betrayal of your true character," said he, "in the midst of those scoundrels' secret councils would mean nothing less than death."

"Doubtless."

"Don't you fear it?"

"No. My assumption of the Bunchy Fives personality will be so perfect (and I shall have more information to go on to-morrow) as to defy detection."

"God be on your side!"

Clew held out his hand, which was fervently grasped.

"It's a risk, but a vital one," said he, simply. "Nothing venture nothing have' is an old motto of mine."

"You really love the young girl, Maggy, as you tell me?"

"Can you doubt it?—With my life!"

"Her story is a romantic one."

"And yet more a sad one."

"From what you say, she surely cannot be the offspring of these wretches, the Knights."

"Certainly not."

"Whose then?"

"That remains to be discovered."

"Dark, you say, of an olive complexion?"

"Yes."

"So is Sylvia, for that matter."

"True; but, concerning Maggy, there is some mystery about hers."

"About her complexion?"

"So it would seem—a mystery in which she is oath-bound."

"What do you think of it?"

"I have my opinion—my suspicion; if it is ever confirmed you shall share it."

"Thanks! One other thing: Your interview with the young girl was doubtless overheard."

"Unfortunately, yes. The subsequent attack on me by the masked men can be explained in no other way."

"The consequences to Maggy—might they not also have been grave?"

The detective's face darkened.

"I've thought of that, but can only hope for the best," said he, in a deeply-troubled tone.

"To raid the house now might be fatal to all our plans. However, I am to meet her again to-morrow evening; she has promised it; when all may be made clearer."

After some further talk the detective rose to go, when there was heard the sound of hurrying steps up the piazza.

Then there was a stumbling fall against the front door, accompanied by a startled call in John Thomas's voice.

On the door being opened, the valet staggered into the hall with saucer eyes and a face like chalk.

"What is this?" exclaimed his master, angrily.

"What have you seen?"

"A ghost, sir!"

"You must have got drunk in rattling short order, you fool!"

"I'm not drunk, sir. I really saw it. So did that queer chap out there."

And he pointed to Danny Crook outside.

"Whose ghost did you see?"

"Your brother's, sir," with impressive solemnity—"Mr. Louis's ghost!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE APPARITION.

"STEP up here, Danny," said the detective, adding in an aside to Mr. Lestrangle: "The boy is a follower of mine, perfectly trustworthy, and afraid of nothing, man or spirit, alive or dead."

Danny came rolling, or rather shouldering, up the steps, when it was noticed that he was also perturbed, though less unnerved than the valet.

"The flunky ain't piling it on too thick, Cap," said he, with unusual seriousness. "It was a queer-looking critter—not human-like at all."

"A happarition!" groaned John Thomas; "a hactual happarition!"

Mr. Lestrangle and Clew had by this time stepped back into the hall and obtained their head-coverings.

"No more of this nonsense!" said the former, who had, nevertheless, lost something of his ruddiness, and belied the way into the garden.

"Show us the spot."

The valet and boy led them along the front fence-line a short distance, and then pointed back to a comparatively lighted space between some ornamental trees; for it had turned out a clear, bright night, though with no moon, and the light from the library windows likewise shafted out over the spot.

"There!" faltered the valet, pointing with a trembling hand; "right in there!"

"Yes," corroborated Danny. "I heered the cockney sort o' gasp an' yelp, directly after passing me along the sidewalk. Then I ran up and looked, too."

"What did you see?" inquired the detective, who alone had maintained his accustomed ease.

"Why, the—the thing, Cap."

"The happarition!" echoed John Thomas again.

"But what was it like?"

"Like Mr. Louis when in hactive life, only white and still and hawful!"

Clew turned to Lestrangle.

"A shrewd trick!" said he. "Don't you take it in?"

"Not quite."

"Why, a trick of our neighbors, to be sure! What better one to secure your desertion of the homestead here, giving them an undisputed field? The dodge is an old one. Nothing like a haunted garden for the frightening off of servants and inconvenient intruders. Nothing like a conventional, bang-up ghost for—"

He was interrupted by the appalled look that suddenly overspread the gentleman's face, together with a fresh gasp from John Thomas and a sharp setting of the jaws on the part of the juvenile tough.

The detective turned his eyes to the lighted space.

There once more stood the apparition, or what ever it might be.

The semblance of a well-dressed gentleman, past the prime of life, eyes of a lack-luster stare, face of a marble whiteness—the face of a corpse.

Even then the detective was not startled out of his hard practicality, save for a surprised instant.

"Follow me, Danny!"

And with that, followed by the fearless lad, he sprang toward the haunted space like a bolt.

But on gaining its center the apparition had disappeared—"faded away into the hair, like an inhuman himage of hawfulness," as the valet subsequently declared, with the reluctant indorsement of his master.

At all events, that was the last of it, and the party presently returned to the piazza, leaving the mystery unsolved.

The detective, however, was as incredulous as before.

"A deuced sharp trick, and well-worked!" was his cheerful comment at parting. "Don't let the thought of it disturb you, sir; and you will be all right when we meet again."

Mr. Lestrangle strove to reply in a like spirit, and the parties separated, Clew and Danny hurrying off to the ferry, where they were just in time for the midnight boat.

"I ought to have left you behind to spot the 'happarition,' Danny," said the detective, as the pair seated themselves in the cabin—a wretched little affair, compared with the ferry accommodations of the present day. "But I hadn't the heart to do it."

Danny shrugged his enormous shoulders, scratched his head, thrust his hands into his pockets, and then took an exceptionally large chew of tobacco.

"I'd hev done it, if ordered, boss," said he, "you can bet your hat an' boots on that! Yes, sir; I'd hev did it," he added, correctively: "but I don't mind sayin' as how I purfer flesh-an'-blood game-birds as a general diet."

"Nonsense! a mere trick. However, there's enough of that. If Feeny is waiting us at Headquarters, he shall be dismissed to bed, and we may all have a longer sleep than usual. In the mean time you and I can expedite matters by talking over an important matter now."

"I'm your cherub, Cap."

"Much will depend on my fidelity in personating Bunchy Fives."

"You can dress an' make up for him to a

charm, Cap. There ain't a dandy in the the-ayter can hold a candle to you in that line."

"Ah; but that isn't altogether the thing. You are doubtless somewhat better acquainted with his personal characteristics than I."

"I've run to fires wid Bunchy since I was knee-high to a Dutch gosling," said Master Crook reflectively, "an' I've studied his intellectual style in precisely nineteen fights—thirteen of 'em stand-ups, four rough-an'-tumbles, an' the remainin' two, well," with an easy wave of the hand, "you might call 'em tooth-an'-nailers, but the better-accepted term would be an out-an'-out bite, gouge an' chaw-up."

"That's it," said Clew, with a smile. "I see you are a born observer, Danny. Well, tell me all you know of Bunchy. By the way, is it true that the fellow was originally of good education and polite manners?"

"A gentleman an' a scholar, sir, an' no mistake. Indeed, he was a bang-up bookkeeper in his innocent prime."

"Ah!" and the detective grew thoughtful; "that may serve my turn equally well."

"Lush an' natural cussedness done the business fur Bunchy, or so I've heered," continued Danny; who then went into a general portraiture of the individual in question.

Feeny was waiting for them in a small room allotted to the detectives (a comparatively insignificant force in those days) at Headquarters.

After imparting certain instructions to his followers, the detective separated from them for the night.

Mr. Tony Goebing, accompanied by the eminent Mr. Bat, promptly called upon Mr. Arlington Dennett on the following afternoon, in accordance with his promise.

Mr. Dennett received them ungraciously in a shabby room that did duty as a library and office—indeed, everything about his place was mean and shabby, though both house and grounds were originally of fine pretensions.

"Sit down, since you *are* here," he grunted out.

Mr. Goebing introduced first himself and then his companion, and they accepted the seats so grudgingly offered, while looking inquiringly at a certain associate of the land-owner, whom the latter snappishly introduced as "my confidential clerk, Mr. Luxmore, gentlemen."

The latter was a smooth-faced, long-haired, unctuous-looking young man, in clerical black, with a quill pen behind his ear, and a generally downcast, discreet air.

"I wasn't aware till now that you employed a secretary, sir," said the real-estate dealer, a little distrustfully.

He was a shrewd, wide-awake man, with a Hebraic cast of features, a dishonest air, and an assumption of pinchbeck gentility in garb and style.

Mr. Dennett took alarm at once. Were they prepared to garrote him on the spot, but for the fortunate presence of this sham private secretary?

"Why should you be aware of anything whatever about me, one way or another, sir?" he spluttered, as a mask for his uneasiness. "Perhaps you would think I can't afford a private secretary, sir?"

Any show of aggressiveness always had the effect of placing Mr. Tony Goebing more thoroughly at his ease.

"Oh, bless you, no; I didn't think anything about it," said he, quietly. "Only it's a luxury that you land-sharks don't indulge in, as a usual thing."

Land-sharks! Mr. Dennett was dumb with indignation, while the confidential clerk's jaw dropped as if fairly dislocated by such a liberty being taken with his employer.

But here Mr. Bat opportunely interposed.

Bald as a billiard-ball, spectacled like a lobster, he was an imposing personality of double-chinned bombast and waistcoated vastness, whose impressiveness was apt to be overpowering even where his scoundrelism was strongly suspected.

"This is all wrong, all informal!" he intoned, with a magniloquent gesture of his fat hands. "I, sir," to Mr. Dennett, with a sort of condescension, "am Mr. Isaac Bat, of the New York Bar."

But old Dennett was only half browbeaten as yet, timid as he ordinarily was.

"I don't care if you're Mr. Vampire of all the bars in existence!" he snapped out. "You're here in my house through no invitation or desire of mine, and the same to your friend, there. What the deuce do you want with me, anyway?"

Mr. Bat glared, and then quietly subsided upon his dignity and his adipose; but Mr. Goebing metaphorically danced to the front again with smiling good-humor.

"Come now, that's to the point, that's business-like!" said he, blandly. "In brief, my dear sir, we're after your terms for that piece of property I've been lately writing to you about."

"In brief, I won't sell at any price; so that business is disposed of."

"But you don't know what I am authorized to offer."

"I don't care what you can offer; not for sale."

"How do you know that it may not be wanted for a school-house, or some other civilized purpose?"

"I don't care if it's wanted for a church; it's not for sale."

Argument proved useless with the stubborn old man. Mr. Bat came to the rescue once more, in the fullness of his ponderosity, but to no better purpose.

"Who are you acting for?" at last cried Mr. Dennett. "Whose money is talking?"

"I'm not at liberty to state, as yet," admitted Mr. Goebing, taken by surprise.

"When you are, fetch him with you, or bring the cash," and Mr. Dennett arose. "Good-morning."

"But hold on; you haven't stated your price."

"Fifty thousand—cash!"

Both visitors fell back in astonishment; the property was dear at a fourth of the amount.

"You're joking!" cried Goebing.

"I never joke."

"Well, lock you, my client is set on that property. Give me even these terms in writing, under your signature."

"I never sign my name when I can help it. You have my word."

"But, my dear sir!" once more supplemented the lawyer, with a due expansion of both double-chin and waistcoat, "this is a natural formality. Your terms, extraordinary as they are, when duly set forth in black and white, over your own name—"

"You shan't have it! Good-morning; I'm tired. Mr. Luxmore," to the private secretary, "attend to answering any further questions, but see to it that I am not again annoyed. I give you full authority."

And the old land-owner stumped abruptly out of the room.

The discomfited visitors were left staring rather doubtfully at the private secretary.

The latter waited till the last echoes of his employer's footsteps died away in some distant corridor.

Then he suddenly locked both doors, the one by which Mr. Dennett had gone out and the one by which the visitors had been admitted.

They started to their feet in some consternation, but this was only the beginning of their surprise.

The secretary, by a swift gesture, had apparently swept from his face and head a film of disguise, as it were, and stood revealed to them in a totally different character.

It was, so to speak, a triumph of double disguise, in which one counterfeit had made way for yet another, equally excellent and impenetrable.

The sanctimonious private secretary had vanished; and in his place stood Bunchy Fives, the representative Bowery b'hoi.

CHAPTER XIV.

TRANSFORMATIONS.

"HALLO!" almost shouted the real-estate fraud, who had for a long time been familiar with the trumpet-bearer of the Bloody Sixth. "What the deuce!"

The eminent Mr. Bat was no less powerfully affected, for ne'er-do-weel Bunchy was a brother of his own wife's, long since ostracized and disowned.

"Bless me!" he gasped, rubbing his spectacles and putting them on again, with a perceptible palpitation of his double-chin. "No, it isn't—yes, it is. But can it be possible?"

Bunchy Fives laughed, twirled his dyed mustache, lighted and stuck in his mouth a huge cigar at the regulation upward slant, and, anchoring himself in the easy-chair still warm from the petulant land-owner's occupancy, cocked his heels on the edge of the table.

"Well, gents, how have I done it?" he inquired, with a fire-boy leer. "That is the question."

"Excellent! you ought to be on the stage, Mr. Fives," said Goebing. "Still, I don't in the least understand."

"Neither do I," said the lawyer.

The spurious Bunchy laughed again, and then, going to a small book-case, produced from it a bottle and some glasses, which he uncereemoniously set out on the table.

"It's the old duffer's private stuff, and a good article," said he, filling the glasses. "Here's luck to all on us. Looks as if it was sort of hunky here, eh?" he added, when the glasses had been drained with no little satisfaction.

"What does it all mean?" asked Goebing.

"Well, have you seen Alderman Fake lately?"

"Yes; this morning."

"Did he mention having seen me last night?"

"Yes; and that you had given him a valuable pointer on some scheme he was indirectly interested in."

"Indirectly is good. Anything else?"

"Yes; he intimated that you were on probation for admission to some sort of secret membership."

"Indeed! how non-committal we are growing

in our old age! As if you didn't know it was the membership of the Black Star Gang that was alluded to!"

"I never heard of such a gang or membership before," said Goebing, promptly.

"Nor I," echoed Bat, with a plethoric smile. "Something reprehensible or vulgar, I should judge."

"Of course, and baby-innocent to boot. But keep up your hypocrisy even with me, if you choose. Now, look here. The pointer I gave Fake was in connection with getting this same old bloke Dennett, on a string with the Black Stars."

Both Goebing and Bat grew strangely interested, in view of their just-announced unsophistication.

"And my being in my present employment," continued the Luxmore-Fives impersonator, "is in order to obtain such another pointer on the same desired lay as shall secure my initiation, without further hesitation, into the Black Star brotherhood at to-night's secret meeting. Now do you understand me any better, you two? or do you prefer still acting the blasted hypocrite with me?"

Goebing smiled shrewdly, while the magisterial flabbiness of the eminent Mr. Bat underwent an ameliorating change.

"Well, in the first place," said the former, "be frank yourself, Bunchy. Otherwise you are mystifying. How is it, for instance, that we find you suddenly stepped out of your natural element—which, to say the least, has not been distinguished by the—urr—refinements of social existence—into the clerical confidence of such a suspicious old curmudgeon as this Mr. Arlington Dennett?"

"Ah, that's the point," interposed Mr. Bat. "What, you, too, pop?" and the pretended Bunchy turned to the lawyer. "Well, you won't deny that I was once recognized as a brother-in-law?"

Mr. Bat hemmed and hawed, but would not deny that, since it was the truth.

"And that I have enough education to support the transformation?"

No; Mr. Bat admitted that he could not deny that either, though Mr. Fives's earlier advantages might well have been obliterated by a subsequent cultivation of less desirable—one might even say, coarse, vicious and degrading—tastes.

"That be hanged!" exclaimed the counterfeit Bunchy, with an impatient oath and a black look, both sufficiently characteristic. "It's admitted that I'm capable of the temporary transformation, isn't it?"

Yes; admitted even by Goebing now.

"Then never do you mind how I have managed to hoodwink and capture the confidence of the old money-guts in possession here. That was my business, not yours; and that I have succeeded in installing myself here is all that you need to care for."

This was also admitted, or, at least, the question was tacitly dropped.

"Why am I here, then?" continued the doubly transformed. "Why have I exposed my little game to you gentlemen at this time and place?"

"Well, why, then?" demanded Goebing.

"That I may have your united influence in furthering my initiation into the Black Stars to-night, in return for the fresh proof of my usefulness which I intend to present to the Gang, in case of my affiliation being agreed on."

Both visitors were now unaffectedly earnest in their attention.

"What will that proof consist of?" demanded Goebing.

"What you, what the Gang," came the answer, with slow impressiveness, "are so anxious to possess, and have thus far pipe-laid and schemed for in vain—the business signature of my employer, Mr. Arlington Dennett, or a dozen of them, if you wish!"

They started up.

"Can you do this?" they exclaimed.

"Yes."

"But how?"

"That is my lookout, not yours. You have my promise. Shall I have your support with the Black Stars?"

"Undoubtedly! you can rely upon that."

"Good enough! Now, get out, for I hear Papa Dennett returning." And the detective, after putting away the bottle and glasses, resumed his Luxmore impersonation. "By-bye, Brother-in-Law Bat and my fraternal regards 'o Mrs. B."

The lawyer made a wry face at this, but lost no time in taking himself off with his companion.

Mr. Dennett returned, and was informed of everything that had taken place.

He plumped himself down in his easy-chair with a bewildered and scared look.

"Good Lord, Captain Clew!" he exclaimed; "none can deny your cleverness and expertness. In fact, it is but little less than miraculous. But here you have promised them the very thing I was most anxious to keep from them."

"Ah, your signature, you mean?"

"Yes."

"To be sure. So sit right down here, if you

please, and oblige me with several examples of it."

"Are you crazy?"

"Not at all; only business like."

"Why, man alive, my signature in their hands and I would be ripe for assassination, as was poor Louis Lestrangle and the rest."

"Not quite. It will take them a day or two to manufacture the bonds and mortgages, or what not, for the reception of the signatures; and they always give several days' grace besides for the purpose of disarming suspicion in the minds of surviving friends. Here you are now—pens, ink and paper."

"I'll see you in Tophet first!" roared the man of many lands. "What the deuce do you take me for—an indestructible salamander or a new Achilles with a charmed life, barring the pinched heel?"

The sweat was rolling down his face, and he fairly danced on the floor in his trepidation.

"Why, what's amiss with you, sir?" exclaimed the detective, though with difficulty refraining from laughing aloud. "I have unfolded my plot to you. You know that it is absolutely necessary for me to become affiliated with the conspirators."

"Not with my self-signed death-warrant as your pass-word, sir! Hang your plot, sir! Hang the conspirators, sir!"

"With all my heart—that is, anent the conspirators! In fact, such is the object of my plot, which, therefore, Heaven speed!"

"Ha! And at my cost, eh, you cold blooded, intriguing dog! Not if I know it! What, you would have my self-created death-warrant as your *Open Sesame*, would you?"

"Oh, death-fiddlesticks! You suppose, then, that I have devised no measures for securing you against personal injury?"

"Ah! you have taken such measures, then?"

"As a matter of course."

"What are they?"

"Well, I shall require no more than to-night to establish the identity of every member of the Gang. To-morrow you shall imitate the example of our friend, Mr. Emil Lestrangle, who, by making public a formal denial of ever having executed a lien upon his estate, and that he ever shall do so, has already successfully forestalled any fraudulent machinations to the contrary."

"To-morrow? Ay, and between now and then I may be found suffocated in my bed, as poor—in Harl-m was, or carved to death in my garden, as was poor Louis Lestrangle! Ugh!" A shivering fit interrupted him. "N-n-no, thank you! Some other time, if you please."

"Oh, but this is ridiculous! Why, don't you see, sir, that the making public of your business habits and determination will doubtless, while securing you, give me and my plot away to the Gang, so that I, and I alone, shall have become marked, not for their cupidity to be sure, but for their vengeance?"

"Eh? How is that?"

It was some time before the terrified old gentleman could be made to see this fact, so evident, in its full force, and still longer ere he could be induced to furnish the required signatures.

But all was effected at last, and the *pseudo* private secretary took himself off in high good-humor, notwithstanding that Mr. Dennett was still left a prey to many and consuming anxieties.

Indeed, the latter only succeeded at last in compromising with his fears by shutting himself up in his great, rambling old house, under bolt, bar, lock and key, as if to sustain a siege, and vowing that he would not stir out thence until assured that the dreaded and ubiquitous Black Star Gang was no more, with its members hopelessly scattered, imprisoned or dangling at the gibbet's forearm.

In this he was assisted by his one faithful servitor, an old Irishman named Jerry McManus, who for years, in the united capacity of cook, chambermaid, body-servant and man-of-all-work, had been the sole companion of the solitary, money-loving old bachelor's unloved existence.

At last the barricading was complete, and the old servant stood scratching his head at the door of the bedroom, in which his master had instituted a sort of inner defensive line, with some superannuated firearms, cutlasses and cavalry sabers by way of an arsenal.

"Bedad, sor," was his comment, "Oi'm a-thinkin' your Honor is safe from thim divils by now."

"What divils, Jerry?"

"The Black Shtars, sor."

"How did you learn of my being in danger from them, you rascal?"

"By plantin' my ear furninst the kay-hole when the detective war besaychin' for your signach-chure, sor."

"The deuce you did?"

"Yis, sor; an' it set me to spickulaytin', did that same."

"Indeed! and with what result?"

"I asked meself a question, your Honor."

"And what was that, Jerry?"

"Whither or no the divil of a detective moight not be wan of thim divils o' Black Shtars him-

self, sor, a-misleadin' of you to your death an' ruin by that same, sor."

"Good God!" Mr. Dennett had never thought of this before, and the suggestion was enough to throw him into an agonized sweat afresh; "do you really think it possible, Jerry?"

"Oi'm merely thinking, sor, that iverything that's doubtful is moighty onsartin," was Jerry's oracular response. "An' it's meself that is terrified for your Honor's safety."

Mr. Dennett controlled his renewed horrors sufficiently to select an atrocious-looking old bell-muzzled blunderbuss, which he duly loaded, topping off the charge with a pint measure of buckshot and slugs.

"Here, Jerry," said he, passing the weapon to his old follower with a trembling hand; "this is for you, and I will prepare one like it for myself. We'll hold the fort, or die together, old friend!"

"That we will, me masther!" assented Jerry, straightway beginning to patrol the corridor with measured, sentry-like steps. "We're purvisioned for a sayge, an' we'll howld the owld hoose against all the murtherin' divils, Black Shtars, blue an' white, in this wicked wur-r-ld!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE APPARITION AGAIN.

LATE in the afternoon of the same day, the detective sought Mr. Lestrangle in the homestead library, and gave him a detailed account of what he had effected with Mr. Dennett, and his sanguine hopes of the success of his plot to fathom the veiled workings and personalities of the Black Star Brotherhood.

Mr. Lestrangle was not remiss in attention—indeed, he listened with a more or less absorbing interest—but it was only when he had finished his story that Clew remarked a certain measure of painful preoccupation in his friend, as he had by this time begun to consider the Count.

His solicitude was aroused, and he asked him the cause of his distraction.

"There is cause enough, my friend," said Mr. Lestrangle. "You remember the care-free, but not reprehensible, life of artistic and rational pleasure that I was wont to lead?"

"Certainly I do."

"The opera, the concert, the drama, paintings, statuary, refined exhibitions, and social amenities of an exalted nature—these were my world, the cosmopolitan indulgence in which had long won for me the humorous sobriquet of 'the Count' among my associates."

"Surely yes, sir."

"Behold me, then, as a fish out of water—or rather as a convict in his prison ward!"

"Ah, but this will not endure long, sir! Your vow, to thus seclude yourself in your ancestral homestead until your brother's murderers shall be brought to justice, will ere long be fulfilled. I am positive of it; and I am toiling, plotting and devising to that end."

"I know that, captain; none could do more or better. Still, I fear you don't quite understand."

And the whilom man-about-town gave him a somber look.

"Oh, but I think I do! You have deprived yourself of the society and pleasures to which you were so long accustomed—and of which, I am sure I can truthfully say, you were justly considered an ornament. You are, naturally enough, dejected and unhappy with the change. But need it be so? Is it necessary that you should be so misanthropical and solitary in fulfilling your praiseworthy determination?"

"Yes, my dear fellow, it is; for I can't help myself."

"What! with this houseful of servants at your command? and with the troops of entertaining and discreet friends who should only be too happy to share the hospitality of your fine old suburban mansion here?"

"There's where you are out, considerably out, my boy."

"How so?"

"My houseful of servants have dwindled down to Mrs. Masters, already half scared out of her rugged Scotch wits, and to my coachman and valet, who only stand by me under protest; while, as for sociability, even among troops of friends there are not so many seeking entertainment or hospitality in a haunted house."

Clew had forgotten the apparition of the night before.

"Oh, the devil!" he exclaimed, with a humorous stare, "the thing still moves about taen?"

"Ay, and has its being, or some phantasmagorical substitute for being," said Mr. Lestrangle, gloomily. "Mrs. Masters swears it peeked into her bedroom window at daybreak this morning. All the old under-servants skipped, with hardly a warning, by noon. And now, as evening is beginning to settle down again, both Dennis and John Thomas will doubtless presently be hugging my immediate vicinity as closely as they dare."

Here the old housekeeper entered with the lighted reading-lamp, and honored the pair with a ghost-seeing look before she retired.

"This is ceasing to be laughable," observed

Clew. "They are working the trick for all it is worth."

"You still deem it a mere trick?"

"Of course I do, and so must you."

"Perhaps I do," assented Mr. Lestrangle. "But it is being played most skillfully, and don't you forget it."

"I'm not likely to," said the detective, rising, "and I'm desirous of unmasking it at the earliest moment. But it is close upon my appointment with my mysterious little enchantress of next door."

"Shall you be likely to drop in again before seeking your Cherry street appointment?"

"Hardly; but that will depend on circumstances."

Here they were interrupted by huddling footsteps and startled exclamations in the adjoining hallway.

They rushed out to perceive the housekeeper, coachman and valet gazing with awe-struck looks at the apparition, which was slowly retreating down the dimly-lighted corridor.

The detective, without a word, darted, like a greyhound, in pursuit.

There was a hurry of footsteps, something like a scuffle, and then the pursuer was seen returning, with a broad grin on his face, and something in his hand.

"What did you encounter?" asked the master of the homestead.

"Something substantial enough to effect its escape, though not without leaving me a souvenir," was the reply.

"And what have you there?"

"A ghost's flaxen-colored wig," and the detective dangled the trophy before their eyes. "It may even be of tow, but at all events it is of the earth earthy. Look for yourself."

They examined it together.

"Now, don't forget," said the detective, "to notice the color of the wraith's hair, should it put in another appearance, which I think hardly likely."

And he took himself off, leaving the household in somewhat improved spirits, if not altogether relieved.

But Clew waited long at the place of rendezvous in the "widow's" garden, and Maggy was not forthcoming.

Full of vague forebodings as to what might have been visited upon the young girl's head, anent the betrayal of their preceding night's interview, he at last stole in the direction of the old house, after first divesting himself in a measure of his Bunchy Fives presentment, in which, of course, he had come as a preliminary of his approaching experience with the Black Star Conference.

The shadowy grounds, so teeming with adventure on the preceding night, seemed wholly deserted now, probably for the reason of "lodge duties" as being preëminent over all others in the minds of the Gang members, great and small.

But, nevertheless, he presently discerned Jane Gorgio bidding her Gypsy brother in the path leading from the now well-known side-door.

"Again I tell you, No, Jem, and for the last time," he heard her say, in an angry voice. "She's not to be seen by any one, least of all by you. If you come here again with your impudent request, I shall tell my mistress of it."

"As if I were afraid of the madame," Jem was overheard to reply. "Her ex-convict husband isn't quite done for yet, if he is in our power at last."

Something followed that was inaudible to the concealed listener.

Then Jem was seen hurrying away, the young woman remaining in the path, hearkening to his retreating steps.

She was turning toward the house again when the detective's vise-like grip closed upon her wrist.

Jane Gorgio was no man's fool or coward.

"You hurt my wrist unnecessarily, young man, for I've no notion of running away from you," she coolly remarked, upon recognizing her captor. "There, that will do, and thankee!" She made a mock courtesy as the clutch was cautiously relaxed. "Now what is it I can do for you?"

The detective was not in the best of humors.

"I saw that precious brother of yours taking himself off," he growled.

"Why, of course you did, young man! What are you here for but to spy and sneak?"

"I may spy to better purpose than to over-watch Jem and you."

She turned her bold black eyes upon him and smiled mockingly, to the revelation of her handsome teeth.

"Very likely, Mr. Flit-by-night. But you're too good-looking for the business. Don't tell John Thomas I said so, though. He's jealous, and mightn't like it."

And she laughed her pleasant laugh—she had an unpleasant one, too, on occasion.

"But you do like the cockney somewhat, eh, Jane?"

"What's that to you?"

"Nothing, at present. You led me into those ruffians' ambushade last night!"

She was silent.

"I say you did!" he repeated, sternly.

"Insist on no explanations, and you'll be told no lies, young man."

"You're a bold girl, Jane Gorgio."

"There's roving Romany blood in me, young man, if I am half-gorgio."

"Why shouldn't I execute summary vengeance on you here and now?"

"No danger of it, young man."

"Why?"

"Because the Fighting Detective doesn't maltreat women. Then I'm good-looking, besides."

And she smiled yet more provokingly.

"Unpityingly you would have misled me to my death last night."

"I don't deny it. You had made my young lady discontented with her mother."

"Her mother? Ah, I understand. Then it was you that overheard us?"

"Of course it was."

"And carried the report to your mistress?"

"I am faithful, or nothing."

"Maggy was to have met me again, this evening."

"But will hardly keep her appointment."

"You think so?"

"Have it your way, but I rather know it."

"Has that woman—Sylvia—dared to misuse the young lady?"

"Make yourself easy, young man. I wouldn't permit that."

"Where is she now, and how is it with her?"

"Find out."

"You will tell me, and you will also bring her to me."

"Come now, young man, that isn't so bad, considering its source. You make merry."

"Not so; I make demands, and compel obedience."

She looked at him quickly, there was something so significant in his tone.

"Not from me do you compel obedience, young man!"

"From you especially, Jane Gorgio."

"In what way?"

"By the utterance of a secret—a secret contained in a single sentence."

She looked at him with renewed interest—almost with dread.

He enunciated a few words in the Gypsy dialect.

Jane Gorgio turned from pale to red, and from red to pale again.

"Wait, sir, if you please," she faltered, submissively. "I will bring my young lady to you, but it will necessarily take some little time."

Not long after she had disappeared, the detective remarked a stealthy figure skulking under one of the windows from which light was issuing.

As the figure at last stepped partly into the shaft of light, he recognized it as belonging to Maggy's pretended father, the miserable tatterdemalion of the preceding night's adventure.

But how changed!

A tatterdemalion no longer, the man was freshly shaven, well if not expensively dressed, and the wolfish, vengeful look had deepened in the sinister face, while his hands and wrists seemed to have been recently torn and lacerated.

As the fellow peered into the lighted window, something flashed, suggesting a revolver-butt or the jeweled hilt of a dagger, from the half-open vestment of his bosom.

The detective stole silently forward.

The next instant he had pounced upon the prowler, like a panther upon its unsuspecting prey.

CHAPTER XVI.

"SWEET MAGGY!"

THE captured intruder struggled desperately but he was a child in the detective's grasp.

A movement in the direction of the weapon in his bosom was similarly checked by a single intimidating glance.

Then he might have cried out but for something yet more repressive and prohibitory in his captor's mien.

"Silence!" hissed the detective; "absolute silence and submission, or you are a dead man!"

The injunction was obeyed, the captive sinking quietly under the iron clutch, and looking up half-mutinously, half-wonderingly into the other's face.

Half-wonderingly, and with reason.

Astonishment was now depicted upon that face, whose eyes, even while the detaining grasp remained unrelaxed upon the cowering form, were gazing into the room with an astounded expression.

It was the interior of the large drawing-room, with which he had once before made acquaintance, that the detective was surveying with that astonished gaze, and this was what he saw therein.

Sylvia Knight, partly in dishabille, had evidently been roused from her reading and confronted by—what?

By the apparition, genuine or assumed, of the murdered Louis Lestrangle!

It stood amid the dimness of the further extremity of the room, pallid, accusing, reproachful, with one finger pointing at its cruel

wounds, as does the ghost of Banquo, pointing to its gaping throat-wound, before the conscience-terrified Macbeth.

If it was a cunning disguise, nothing seemed wanting now—not even the flaxen hair of which the detective was sure he had deprived it but half an hour previously.

Threatening, accusatory and terrifying, there it stood, a horrid shape, as real and apparent a specter as any ever heard or read of.

The disturbed woman had started from her luxurious chair, and with one hand resting convulsively upon the reading-table, whose shaded lamp showered down its confined brightness as if in mockery upon her clustering finger-rings, rich with the diamond's and the ruby's shine, and the other pressed tightly under her laboring breast, was devouring her ghostly visitant with wide-staring, horrified eyes—shudderingly feasting them upon that murder's work.

Her long, raven hair had escaped from its slight fastening, and was tumbling down her superb shoulders, partly bare, and shapely back.

Her arms, uncovered to the elbow, were faultless in their whiteness and their plumpness, though now quivering as if with a sudden palsy.

Indeed, the whole statuesque figure, in its scarlet dressing-robe, with an occasional glimpse of snowy underwear, was quivering thus.

It was a spectacle at once painful and fascinating.

The mature beauty of the woman had never been seen under more ravishing advantage, and yet her conscience-smitten terror was so intense as to be simply pitiable.

The detective was, naturally enough, bewildered.

It was quite evident that his cowering prisoner had caught no glimpse of this tableau, so that it must have been instituted at the very instant of his being so unexpectedly overpowered.

Nor was this all, so far as the unaccountability of the thing was concerned.

If the apparition was but the outcome of a cunning masquerade, as the detective still could not doubt that it was, it was equally evident that the "widow" could not be privy to the deception.

Her terror and amazement were too real to admit of a doubt as to their genuineness; and, besides, she believed herself alone in that dread presence, and could therefore have no occasion for dissimulating.

Who, then, apart from her instigation, could be interested in the presentation of the ghostly part?

Or might there be some thing truly unearthly in the apparition, after all.

While the detective was thus speculating, the apparition stole out of a neighboring door, Mrs. Knight buried her face in her arms with a low moan, and the strange scene, which had not lasted for the time it has taken to describe it, was at an end.

He lost no further time in silently dragging his prisoner into the seclusion of a neighboring clump of ornamental trees.

"Algernon Knight—ex-convict and villain at large—I know you!" he whispered, in a deep, menacing voice. "Answer me truly, and you are safe; prevaricate or prove recalcitrant, and you shall be returned to the custody of those that know no mercy."

"All right, sir," was the sullen response. "You've got me cornered."

"Where were you taken to by the men who overpowered you last night?"

"To an old rendezvous up on the Harlem flats."

"How did you escape thence?"

"By the luckiest of accidents. Then an old pal of mine fed and clothed me."

"His name?"

"Bob Sutton."

"Once the popular landlord of the Darby and Joan in Spruce street?"

"Yes."

"And afterward state-prisoned for complicity in a burglary with one Hobdy, an English cracksmen, who, however, escaped by corrupting one of the city prison jailers?"

"The same."

"Doesn't Sutton still owe 'time'?"

"No; pardoned out a year ago, and now drinking himself to death in obscurity."

"He has given you a home with him?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"In Hell's Kitchen, next adjoining the engine-house lot, in Greenwich village."

"Why are you here again this evening?"

The ruined adventurer ground his teeth in the darkness.

"For revenge upon that devil's witch, my wife! I could not help it—the fiend of unrest was in my heart. She sold me to the French prison-hulks!"

"You must forego your revengeful purpose, at least for the present."

"You say it, and you've got me cornered."

*Real characters and an actual incident, vide New York criminal records of fifty years ago.

"In return for your promise to do so, and for one other thing, I promise you the fullness of revenge, not only upon that woman, but upon all her criminal associates."

"Who are you?"

"Captain Clew, of the New York detective force."

"Ha! the Fighting Detective. I might have guessed it. You have my promise."

"Good! I trust you. Go now!"

"Hold on!" and Knight slowly shook himself upon being relieved at last of the detective's powerful grip.

"What is it?"

"What is 'the one other thing' you expect of me, in return for your aid?"

"This: The truth with regard to the parentage and early history of the young girl now under Sylvia Knight's charge."

"What! our daughter Maggy?"

"You know you lie!"

"That's so, Cap."

"Beware how you undertake to trifle with me!"

"I sha'n't forget again."

"Will you give me the information I demand?"

"Yes—some time. Assist me to the revenge you promise, and all shall be made known to you. I swear it!"

"Never mind swearing—you won't dare to deceive me. Now begone. Remain indoors in your retreat as much as possible. But considerations for your own safety will counsel that—for you must know the murderous resolve of the Gang to destroy you. Expect a communication or visit from me at any time. That will do."

The man shrunk off down a path leading to the garden gate.

A few moments later Jane Gorgio slipped out of the side-door, but alone.

The detective was at her side in an instant.

"You are to wait again at last night's trysting-place," said she, shortly. "She will come to you presently."

Clew was dissatisfied.

"Why isn't she with you now?" he demanded, sternly. "I have already waited long—fully fifteen minutes. Would you dare deceive me now, after—" he made a significant pause.

"I am not deceiving you, Captain Clew," said the young woman, with unwonted humility. "I have had difficulties to surmount. Miss Maggy was in close confinement, and I have had to be unfaithful to my mistress's orders—to obey your command. Miss Maggy will herself explain. She is now preparing, on my advice, a dummy to occupy her place in the couch. Mistrust not but that she will hasten to you."

He was struck by the change in Jane's voice and manner, and looked her searchingly in the face, which happened just now to be turned into the side-light from the adjoining window.

Were she in his secret interest, too, what an advantage would it be!

"You are prettier when less bold and scoffing than your wont, Jane Gorgio," said he, gravely. "Your face is softened, your eyes are moist. Whence this change, my friend?"

"What of that?" she said, half-resentfully. "It is always so after I have been with her."

"Then you can't be with her too often."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"You have the making of a good woman in you, Jane—you might be as good as you are clever and attractive; and you have the love of a good and true man in the devotion of John Thomas, plain, matter-of-fact fellow though he is."

She looked up at him kindly, but with a tinge of roguishness in her black eyes.

"Go along with you, Mr. Detective!" said she, half-banteringly. "At least you won't have me for a willing enemy again, or my name's not Jane Gorgio, and there is no Zingara in my blood!"

He had not been at the rendezvous on the river-bank many minutes before he heard Maggy's light steps hurrying to meet him.

She was greatly excited, and, to his delighted astonishment, rushed forthwith into his arms, where she burst into tears.

"They imprisoned me, they threatened me, I thought I shouldn't be able to come again!" she sobbed.

When somewhat subdued, however, she had to acknowledge that no great harm had befallen her, though she had undergone confinement in a strong-room at the top of the house, and Mrs. Knight had been greatly incensed.

CHAPTER XVII.

MAGGY'S EXPERIENCE WITH HER PRETENDED MOTHER.

NEVER was maidenly agitation soothed by lover with more tender fondness than was done by our Fighting Detective at that trysting-tree.

Important as was his subsequent engagement, for a space he took no note of time.

The moments were as uncounted jewels in an Arabian fairy-tale, the short hour allotted him as a golden dream, stretching out and on indefinitely into an unknown Paradise of deliriously-imagined joys and love-fraught tendernesses.

"And all for me?" he murmured. "All these

hardships were suffered merely on my account and for my sake?"

"That was well enough," faltered Maggy, still catching her breath amid the subsiding sobs. "But it wasn't so much, though at first she frightened me dreadfully, and I feared she was going to kill me."

"Had but a hair of this precious head been harmed— But compose yourself, my beloved, and let me know all. I must have the whole story."

She gave him a shy kiss, and then modestly strove to disengage herself from the strong arms that had closed so willingly around her.

Love's virgin kiss from the rich still curtailed, still scarcely self-imagined treasures of a pure maiden's heart!

Our detective had heard and read of such a thing before, and mostly, let it be owned, with cynical disbelief in what was vaunted as the sensation; but never before had he thrilled to its divine ecstasy, with the warm breath of its actuality exhaling into his spirit as from the petaled depths of a fresh-bursting bud in the gardens of a privileged dream.

Who and what was he, with his stormy past behind, his danger-girt present as his harsh environment, that such an unspeakable boon should come to him at last?

For an instant his arms tightened, instead of relaxing, their clasp of that delectable form, and his burning kisses fairly rained upon the poor, confused little face.

Then with a great wrench he was himself again, or something like it, and she was free, though faint, trembling and overwhelmed.

"Try to tell me everything in detail, my darling," he urged, after leading her to a rustic seat looking out upon the shore, though itself concealed in great part by the overhanging trees. "See; here we have the reflection from the water, and the air is comparatively lightened. Tell me everything that happened from the instant when that woman darted out and dragged you into the house."

"Ah, how terrified I was! You saw that much?"

"Yes; and was powerless to prevent. It was over and done, you were there and whisked away, in a fleeting instant. It was Jane Gorgio who betrayed the secret of that interview?"

"Yes; she has confessed it. But she is sorry now, and I have forgiven her."

"Perhaps I shall, too; but that depends. Well?"

"Well, as soon as my—as soon as Mrs. Knight had dragged me into the parlor I saw that she must have been informed of everything that had passed between us."

"She was like a tigress—deadly pale and panting, but with her eyes like live coals. At first she began to shake me, being too frantic for intelligible utterance, but I soon put an end to that."

"Strong as she is, and made still stronger by her fury at that moment, I tore myself indignantly out of her grasp and stood at bay."

"How dare you treat me thus, madam?" I exclaimed. "You are less like a woman than a wild animal. If you don't want me to hate and despise you, there must be no more of this!"

"So, it is madam now, not mamma any more!" she managed to exclaim. "Ingrate! do you not know that I am your mother?"

"I strove to be calm and think, and at last, though she terrified me greatly by the mingled fury and fright in her aspect, I answered her boldly:

"No, madam, I do not know that, and, moreover, I have very serious doubts that you are in truth my mother."

"She paled yet more, and it seemed to me that even the fierce light in her eyes quailed a little."

"This to me, your own mother?" she panted.

"Ah, what guile, what insane imaginings, must that vile detective have been pouring into your ears! Jane was right. All she reported to me as overhearing must be but too true. He has not only beguiled the heart out of your deceitful breast, but has even incited you to turn against your own flesh and blood. The cold-blooded scoundrel, the sleuth-bound in lover-like disguise! Should he succeed in bringing me and my political associates to the gibbet, you may then know whether you have been ungrateful or not."

The detective was rubbing his hands silently and thoughtfully.

"Ha!" he interposed, in the slight pause that came. "Said she so? Said the cunning Sylvia so much as that?"

"And yet more to the same effect that has since escaped my memory," continued the young girl. "Madam, I made reply to her, 'you may spare yourself this agony on the score of my assumed ingratitude.'"

"What! you do not believe me?" she wailed. "Oh, Maggy! do not break my heart by saying that you do not believe me."

"Steel yourself, madam, for I must needs say it," I replied. "And, altogether apart from what may have been told me to-night, you must know perfectly well that you have never acted exactly as a mother to me, nor have I felt as a daughter should toward yourself. If I am real-

ly your daughter, pray tell me your reasons for the mystery and secrecy with which you have seen fit to surround me from my earliest recollections. Why should a mother conceal her own daughter's identity so industriously from the world?"

"To this she made no reply save to look at me reproachfully. But I was not in the mood for humoring her sham pathos any more than her unaffected rage."

"I was goaded into saying more than in my cooler moments I might have done."

"I took up her allusion to her 'political associates,' and laughed it to scorn in a manner she could not mistake."

"Then, throwing off her pretensions to move me to softness, her rage began to repose in her afresh."

"Fool, you know too much!" she hissed between her clinched teeth. "You may ruin me, and ruin all!"

"And when I spoke of my interview with her returned husband in the garden, and what had there befallen, her frenzy was once more unrestrained."

"Ingrate wretch!" she screamed; "has that marplot again returned to trouble joy, and have you dared to keep an appointment with him, of all men, without my knowledge?"

"Why, madam, is he not my dear father, just as much as you are my sainted mother?" I asked, ironically. "Would you have me refuse the prayer and betray the confidence of my own flesh and blood when in distress?"

"I had better have held my tongue. With that she flew at me afresh, seizing me with a strength that passionate fury rendered irresistible."

"But for Jane Gorgio entering and interposing at that juncture I believe she would have killed me. Jane at once interfered to protect me, notwithstanding that she was panting and out of breath, as if from hard running."

"Ah!" commented the detective again, as there was another slight pause; "she was doubtless just from having led me the will-o'-the-wisp chase that brought me into that ruffianly ambush. But more of that anon."

"As it was," continued Maggy, "though madam was induced to forego actually murdering or beating me, she snatched me up in her strong arms, and, calling on Jane to follow with a lamp, hurried with me up to the top of the house as if I were no more than a doll."

"There I was taken into the strong-room, which has, up to a short time ago, when Jane assisted me to escape here to your side, been my prison from that hour."

"So, Miss Busybody!" exclaimed madam, hoarse with passion, as she cast me on the wretched pallet, "you remain just here, under bolt and bar, until you come to your senses. After that I have a special fate, just determined in my own mind, in store for you."

"What is that?" I had the curiosity to inquire. "You shall be married." "Married?" I echoed. "Indeed, you shall. You quit this prison-house solely to approach the altar's foot. And a fine bridegroom have I set my mind on for you, my dear—one who will be enabled to keep you mum and in order, if I can't."

"To whom would you so marry me?" I asked. "To Jem Gorgio, as I am a living woman and your own mother, though you would even deny me!" she exclaimed. "So prepare yourself, Miss Disobedience, for to Gypsy Jem and none other shall you go when you quit this room."

"With that she flung herself out of the place, Jane following her, and I was left to the miserable solitude of my own thoughts until early this morning."

"Then Jane came, bringing me food. But madam had erred in supposing that Jane had been hopelessly won over to her interest by the thought of marrying me to her ruffianly brother. Jane remained, as she had always been more or less, my friend and sympathizer."

CHAPTER XVIII. SECRET FOES.

MAGGY had finished her story, and the detective in turn gave her some account of his own adventures after separating from her.

But it was the strange scene recently witnessed through Mrs. Knight's drawing-room window that he dwelt on most particularly, in the hope that she might afford him some suggestion by which to account for it.

But the young girl was no less mystified than he, though equally agreed that the apparition was the result of a cunning trick, for she was almost wholly void of superstitious belief.

"But who can it be," demanded the detective, "that is equally bent, not only in terrorizing Mr. Lestranger's household, but on deceiving Sylvia herself? It is absolutely unaccountable."

"Indeed it is," admitted Maggy. "But, stay! might it be Jane Gorgio herself?"

The detective started.

"A woman as the masquerader! Hardly, though it has not occurred to me before. What suggested this to you?"

"I hardly know. But Jane is very clever, and has always been an adept at disguises and im-

personations. She often got them up for my entertainment when I was a child."

"But her object in these cases, or, rather, her double object?"

"There is the puzzle. However, she might first have designed the trick in the interest of madam and her associates on her own responsibility, in order to empty the homestead of its occupants."

"Yes; but afterward to turn the deception upon Mrs. Knight herself?"

"It does seem inconsistent, but then Jane is a woman full of the oddest of changes and caprices."

"I should judge so."

"I think I have it—a possible motive for the double-acting, at least."

"What is it?"

"It might have been necessary to frighten madam, too, in order that I might be enabled to effect my escape to-night for this interview."

"But wasn't Jane with you almost constantly, didn't she have numerous difficulties to surmount, in assisting your escape from the strong-room?"

"By no means. She came but twice, once to unlock the door of my prison, and notify me of her intention to befriend me; and once again to bid me hasten, for I had been in bed, with no thought of escaping to you at first."

"Aha! and did you not even have to prepare a dummy, to occupy your place in the couch?"

Maggy laughed.

"Did Jane say so? How preposterous! Madam would have brought no light in coming to make sure of my being safe under lock and key or not."

"This begins to look well for Jane Gorgio as our masquerader. For, at all events, it would indicate her friendliness toward our interviews."

"Yes; and then Jane is really in love with Mr. Lestranger's man, John Thomas, or I am greatly mistaken. And now I think of it, there are other reasons—"

She came to a sudden stop, her hand clutching her companion's arm, her eyes riveted blankly upon a neighboring path.

The detective saw it, too.

It was the specter once more—the counterfeit presentment of the murdered gentleman—and it was stealing back into the shadows, as if a mere vaporous shape borne along by the vagrant wind.

Once more the detective darted in pursuit, but with no better success than theretofore.

"No use!" said he, returning with a baffled look. "Here, there and away again. One might as well hunt down a moon-ray, or give cry to a smoke-wreath."

Maggy had grown very grave, though she had not succumbed to fright.

"That you should give chase to such a thing at all is credit enough," she said. "Might it really be a spirit? I have heard of even strong-minded persons believing in such things."

"But never of a spirit wearing a cheap blonde wig, such as I captured from this one's head, as I related to you in the homestead hallway this very evening?"

"No, hardly." And Maggy joined him in his laugh. "But it is very extraordinary."

"Yes, and, more's the pity, will have to remain so for the present." He consulted his timepiece. "My darling, we must separate."

She clung to him fondly.

"Must you meet some other adventure, my beloved?"

"Yes; and a grave one—perhaps one of the gravest of my experience."

"Of what nature?"

"I dare not tell you now. But you will come to me here again to-morrow night; then I shall tell you of it."

"Yes, yes; but, oh, you may be going into some yet newer peril!"

"And that grieves you, even in prospect, my angel?"

"Grieves me?" His arms were again about her. "It makes my blood run cold!"

For a single instant she was strained to her lover's breast, and their lips clung together.

Then he was hurrying her back toward the house along the path up which the apparition had effected its flight.

"Good-night! may God and his good angels watch over you!"

Then there was the parting embrace, the last clinging kiss, and she had slipped into the side-door.

"Be careful of the ferry!" warned a hollow voice in the detective's ear, as he turned to go. "There is danger lying in wait for you there."

He could see nothing, swiftly as he wheeled in his tracks; there was a mere breath, like that of a passing gust, and he was still alone in the garden-walk.

"That precious ghost again, like enough!" he muttered to himself.

He stole a parting glance in at the parlor window.

Mrs. Knight was reclining in her easy-chair, with her book under the reading-lamp, her eyes upon the printed page, as quiet, as calmly beautiful, as if she had never been in the least dis-

turbed by an unexpected visitant, spectral or human.

"That woman is a mystery—even a greater mystery than the ghost itself!" muttered the detective to himself, as he slipped in among the trees to effect his rehabilitation in the Bunchy Fives character. "But, with a due amount of patience, I suppose all mysteries may be solved at last."

Notwithstanding the warning he had received, he felt once more secure as he regained the street and started for the ferry.

"If it was friendly Jane from whom the warning came," he thought, "she could, of course, have known nothing of the security of my disguise."

It was not yet half-past nine.

"Hello, Bunchy!" called out one of a group on the lighted Pig and Whistle porch, as he was passing. "Come and take a nip."

"Not to-night," he replied, and then turned the corner toward the ferry, without having recognized the speaker.

The ferry-bell was tolling, as was the custom in those days, and he had to run for it.

The surroundings were lonely and miserable, and the ferry accommodations themselves wretched affairs.

He darted through the arch, dropping his fare, and was just in time for a flying leap upon the boat, when three men seemed to spring up out of the very flooring.

He collided with them, was momentarily hurled back, the boat shot out into the slip beyond retrieval, and the next instant, furious at having missed the trip, he was battling apparently for his life with the ruffianly trio.

"There's some mistake," said one. "It's Bunchy Fives, the Bowery plug!"

"No matter," said another. "Orders is orders. Fire him into the river!"

All this time the blows were falling thick and fast, and notwithstanding his pugilistic superiority, it was all that Clew could do to hold his own and keep from being hustled off into the slip.

"Lend a hand!" he shouted to one of the ferrymen who now came running across the bridge. "Don't you see they're trying to murder me?"

Under ordinary circumstances, the Fighting Detective would not have signaled for aid, be the odds what they might against him, but now the fear of missing his Cherry street appointment was uppermost in his mind, and he could think of nothing else.

The man was coming to his assistance when a furiously-driven team of working-horses dashed in under the arch and he was sent reeling.

Then there was a final struggle, mixed up with the plunging of the horses.

The detective somehow lost his footing, repeated blows fell upon his chest, and then he was hurled out into the darkness of the swirling tide.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE INITIATION.

BUT he had caught on a short pier just under the projection of the ferry-bridge, and was thus saved the immersion that might have cost him the integrity of his disguise.

There he hung, however, for the moment quite helpless.

"Man overboard!" yelled a voice over his head. "Arrest that man—he is one of the scufflers!"

Then there was a trampling of many feet, during which the suspended detective could hear some one say:

"I tell you it couldn't have been Bunchy, for all appearances! Even Bunchy could never have hit out like that."

Then a lantern was lowered and in a few minutes Clew was dragged up out of the slip, fortunately but little injured and as dry as when he went into it.

His mysterious assailants had disappeared, and only honest-seeming men, prominent among whom was the driver of the unruly team, were there under the rejuvenated lanterns to offer him their congratulations.

"Never mind, sir," said the ferry-hand who had tried to come to his assistance at the start. "An extra boat will come in five minutes, so that you won't have lost much time after all."

This was about the best salve that could have been offered under the circumstances.

"Who were the chaps you were scuffling with?" inquired the teamster. "By Jingo! but you were letting 'em have it right and left. But for that misstep—and my plagued off-wheeler was the cause of that—you'd have laid out the three of 'em."

"I never saw them before," said the detective, briefly. "I suppose they took me for some one else. It'll be all right and even some time—I hope."

He would still be in time for the appointment, which was the main thing.

Nevertheless, the detective was not a little troubled in his mind while making the passage a few minutes later in the extra boat.

It was doubtless solely in his true character, and by agents of the Black Stars, that he had been at-

tacked; the forewarning in Mrs. Knight's garden would seem to prove that beyond doubt; and in that case why had not his assumption of Bunchy Fives's personality, if perfect in its make-up, interposed to save him from the assault?

He shuddered to think of the disguise failing him in the midst of the murderers' conclave into which he intended to be admitted.

And he was not given to shuddering at the worst of prospects either; but he knew that, in such a case, his wife would not be worth a minute's purchase, were he ten-fold the dreaded and redoubtable fighter that he was.

However, he comforted himself with recollecting the words that had been exchanged by his assailants; and as he stepped from the boat his reassurance was strengthened by a number of hangers-on at the Fulton Market corner familiarly accosting him in his assumed character; and this continued, interlarded with numerous invitations to drink, all the way along the river-front.

"How my bibulous prototype, the real Bunchy," he thought to himself, "would rejoice in these manifestations of his popularity at the present time!"

Cherry street was even a less savory locality in the days of which we write than now, when its reputation is none of the best.

Miserable drinking-dens, low lodging-houses and rickety tenements were its ruling characteristics.

In fact, it was one of the meanest localities of the lower wards, rivaling the Five Points themselves in desperateness, and scarcely surpassed by the teeming heart of Seven Dials in London.

And No. 21 proved to be one of the meanest, suspicious-looking houses of the squalid locality; a two-storied and basement frame den, apparently altogether deserted, with a narrow and filthy alley-way at one side, having a battered street-lamp at its corner.

However, the immediate block was comparatively unfrequented, though the rest of the street on either side was streaming with the vicious, drunken and riotous life peculiar to the quarter.

So, just as a distant town-clock was striking the appointed hour, the pretended trumpet-bearer of the Bloody Sixth's "machine" took his watchful stand under the street-lamp with a devil-may-care air, waiting to be "starred," in accordance with preliminary instructions, whatever that might be.

Nor had he long to wait.

Two rough-looking men, muffled to the eyes, and apparently drunk, presently came staggering along the narrow sidewalk toward him from different directions.

When before him, however, they suddenly came to a pause, straightening up, and each extended a hand to him, with the low-voiced exclamation:

"If you're the man, and mean it, Star it there!"

Without inquiring into their meaning, the disguised detective unhesitatingly gave a hand to each.

Instantly, accompanying the vigorous hand-pressures, there was a sharp, prickling pain in either palm, such as might be caused by a heavy and hot sharp-edged die being pressed into the flesh.

On being released, each palm was found to have been impressed with a six-pointed black star, as if burnt therein.

"Look at your wrists," said the taller of the muffled men.

The novice did so.

His wrists had also mysteriously received the same impression.

"On your hands, and on your pulses," said the man. "Do you likewise feel it in your heart's core?"

"Yes," was the reply, at a venture.

"What is it that you feel there in your heart's core?"

"The symbol of the Black Star."

"Has it an interior meaning?"

"I have not been informed of one."

"Give it one out of your own consciousness and desire."

The novice assumed a vicious and reckless air.

"Brotherhood to the death, secret, inviolable and remorseless!" he replied.

"Good enough, for a beginning!" and there was a tinge of approval in the stranger's voice.

"Go on at another hazard. Through what?"

"Through everything."

"Even crime?"

"Through crime and bloodshed, through assassination and murder, through a very hell on earth, should the interests of the Brotherhood demand it."

"You'll do. But there is yet time for you to back out, if you are faint-hearted."

"I am Bunchy Fives. The wheels of my destiny never roll backward."

"Follow, then."

The muffled pair forthwith entered the alley way, the novice following.

A faint light glimmered at the upper end over a deep-set door in a tall, dingy rear tenement,

not one of whose many windows gave any sign of life and light.

Admitted at this door into a narrow, faintly-lighted passage, Clew followed his conductors until suddenly he was left in complete darkness.

"There is a stair at your right," said a voice.

"Ascend and then knock."

He obeyed.

After ascending two flights of rickety steps, as near as he could judge, he came to a barrier of some sort, at which he knocked accordingly.

The barrier was a door, which flew open, disclosing an interior, dimly suffused by a bluish luster whose source was not apparent.

"Enter and wait!" commanded another voice, borne it would seem out of the air.

He did so, the door closing behind him with a hollow bang.

Instantly the bluish light became a lurid one of dazzling brightness, revealing most unexpected surroundings.

In the first place, at either side of the novitiate, stood the rough-looking muffled men, though he had not been aware of their following him up the stair.

He was before a sort of altar, at either side of which was a slowly-revolving star-shaped wheel, each prong of which consisted of a glistening dagger-blade, the tips of which nearly clashed together, so closely were the wheels.

Just under them, on a stand, covered with a spotless white cloth, lay a keen poniard, the handle toward his hand.

Back of the stand reclined a sleeping woman, or the wonderfully life-like imitation of one, on a red-draped couch.

The air-borne voice spoke again.

"The candidate will approach, seize the poniard, and bury it in the sleeper's bosom!"

The novice recoiled in horror.

CHAPTER XX.

A TERRIBLE TEST.

THAT the sleeper was alive seemed beyond question.

The face, turned to one side, was but partly visible—the face of a young and attractive woman.

The modestly-attired bosom, from which the red coverlet was partly withdrawn, rose and fell regularly with the gently-taken breaths; the hands and arms, also, exposed were in careless attitudes, the one partly bowed up over the face and head, the other listlessly fallen to one side; furthermore, the crimson drapery shaped itself to the body and limbs beneath in reposeful and graceful folds.

"Fear not!" cried the mysterious voice again.

"This is the master-test. Strike and slay."

The novice made a resolute gesture of refusal, and remained motionless.

"He is faint-hearted," said the voice. "Explain the test, and give him one more chance. It is too late for his retreat. Henceforth he is the Black Star Brotherhood's, or he is death's!"

A touch upon either shoulder cautioned the candidate to turn from contemplating the sleeper to regard his conductors anew.

A transformation had been effected in their appearance.

Instead of the roughly-dressed, muffled figures, there now stood in their places two shapely-looking gentlemen in elaborate evening dress, but with their faces concealed by black silk masks.

The novice now became instinctively aware that these men, both tall, but one slightly taller than the other, were William Cooper, alias Bristol Bill, and John or George, otherwise, One-Eyed Thompson, respectively.

In an instant, and with a slight movement, each of these men presented a cocked pocket-pistol (the revolver was scarcely evolved as yet out of the inventor's brain) to the candidate's head.

"You must obey the voice," said the taller, curtly. "It is the supreme test."

Clew could not commit murder, even to penetrate the secrets of the Black Star Brotherhood, and he felt his life hanging by a hair.

"Wasn't something said about an explanation?" he stammered.

"Yes; but it shall be brief. The supreme, almost sole, test of initiation into the bosom of our Order—and novitiates are few and far between—is the capacity for unquestioning obedience even to the extent of deliberate, cold-blooded murder; robbery and consequent murder, or *vice versa*, being the essential, grounding principles of that Order; whose sole and everlasting precept is contained in these words: Wealth through Blood, and Dead Men tell no Tales! For this purpose has the victim before you been provided. She is worthy of, and has been duly adjudged to, death, through having attempted to betray one of our brethren to the myrmidons of the law. The methods of the Order are irrevocable and deadly. She has been secretly conveyed hither in the drugged sleep that now possesses her, from which she must momentarily awaken at the piercing of your assassin's steel, thence to overleap the terrors of the Eternal Silence. Strike, or die!"

The candidate-detective started and whitened, with his eyes riveted upon the softly-breathing, unconscious victim.

He could not doubt the reality of the bloody test.

Women, no less than men, who had been suspected of having offended the Black Star Gang, had before this mysteriously disappeared, never more to be seen or heard of.

As to the genuineness of the victim, could there exist a doubt of it now?

His eyes were fixed upon her with an agony of searching inquiry, in the hope of discovering some trick, device or delusion, but thus far in vain.

It could be no lay figure, cunningly invested with the semblance and motions of slumbering life; that seemed impossible; a living, a human victim, that and that alone forced itself upon the the gazer's horrified and reluctant consciousness.

For the first time in his life the Fighting Detective knew what it was to be hopelessly, helplessly, absolutely appalled.

He was in a hideous nightmare. The beaded sweat started through the fictitious swartheness of his complexion in huge drops.

"Strike, or die!" commanded the stern voice from nowhere.

"Strike, or die!" echoed the visible mentors, and this time the cold muzzles of the pistols were planted hard against the miserable novitiate's temples, one from either side.

There was no help for it, no other alternative; he must murder or be murdered.

But the agony of hesitation and suspense lasted but for a moment.

Whether the novitiate at that instant perceived the longed-for detection of a sham, or for some other cause, he drew himself erect, his perplexity at an end.

"Strike, or die!" was repeated for the last time, but unnecessarily.

He strode forward with a firm step and seized the poniard.

The barrier of revolving blades, the star-shaped bristling wheels, drew further apart, leaving an open passage to the bosom of the sleeping victim.

The novitiate had recovered his nerve wonderfully. He was even willing to enlarge upon the dramatic, or melo-dramatic features of the test—to pile on the agony, as it were.

"This to the Brotherhood!" he exclaimed, elevating the knife and kissing it. "Wealth through Blood, and Dead Men tell no Tales!"

There was a faint murmur, as though from the applause of invisible spectators, many in number.

He crossed the brief dividing space with a rapid step, raised the knife aloft, and buried it to the hilt in the reclining figure's bosom.

Instantly, however, he started back, appalled once more.

Had his penetration been at fault, and had there been no cunning trick for the delusion of the senses, after all?

The knife in his hand was red and reeking, and, following its withdrawal, a column of blood had spouted from the wound.

Then the victim had partly risen from the couch, her hands outstretched, her glazing eyes riveting him with their final glare, the lips parted and moving, as if with a dying curse upon the murderer.

Then she fell back motionless; but at the same time there was a just perceptible click, as if from some concealed machinery, accompanied by an indubitably automaton-like stiffening of one of the knees and elbows; and the novitiate once more breathed freely, satisfied that he was not yet a genuine murderer.

As he reeled back, however, perfectly willing to simulate a horror he could no longer feel, his conductors grasped him by the hand with a congratulatory pressure.

"Henceforward, brother, you are one of us!" they exclaimed. "You have nobly withstood the crucial test."

The lurid glare increased in brilliancy and the knife-bristling wheels revolved with augmented velocity.

Suddenly they began to crackle and explode, like pin-wheels in a pyrotechnical display, save that instead of sparks and fire-jets they threw off knife-blades.

These were shed with startling force, some impinging in the floor, others in the walls, ceiling or altar-piece, and yet others in the motionless form of the slain victim—or the cunning semblance thereof.

Then there was a sudden darkness, so dense as to be almost felt, like the ingathering folds of an enveloping pall or cloak, and the candidate felt himself being hurried away rapidly and irresistibly.

Either arm was grasped by one of his conductors, and presently he felt a hoodwink being fastened over his eyes.

The rapid movement lasted a good while, though he felt certain that he was being led circuitously, instead of in a straight course.

Then there was a pause, and he was aware that he was once more in a lighted space.

"Has the candidate passed through the supreme ordeal?" inquired a voice.

"Nobly," replied one of the conductors. "Unflinchingly has he stained his hands with innocent human blood."

"Admit him to the light and to the bosom of our Black Star Brotherhood. Henceforth he is one of the Murderers' Own!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE MURDERERS' CONCLAVE.

THE hoodwink was stripped from the novitiate's eyes.

He was in the center of a brilliantly lighted apartment, in the presence at last of the assembled members of the infamous Black Star Brotherhood.

But, to his keen secret disappointment, there was not a face, save his own, that was not impenetrably masked.

Was his longed-for task of identification to be deferred? Had he passed through that terrible test, and perhaps blackened his soul ineffaceably with actual murder (for he was still distressfully uncertain on this dreadful point), but to meet with disappointment and vexatious delay?

One of those present, and occupying a place of honor at that, was a woman, who, he felt certain, was none other than Sylvia Knight, though the baffling fact of her features being invisible none the less remained.

At her right hand sat a portly man, who, he was equally certain, was Mr. Lawyer Bat.

Next to him was a paunchiness that might well have belonged to Alderman Fake; and an exceptionally angular figure on the woman's left was strongly suggestive of Justice Dredger's personality; with a shorter man at his elbow whose wiriness was very like Mr. Tony Goebeling, the real-estate sharp.

It was therefore not a little exasperating that the detective was wholly unable to verify these conjectures.

The room was sumptuously furnished, but, with the exception of a great black star, made of jet or some other sparkling substance, on the wall directly over the woman's head, no emblematic features were seen.

Directly before her there stood a low stand, with a register of signatures spread open upon it, and a raised cushion at its foot.

The woman was the first to speak, after the bringing of the candidate to the light, and in her voice likewise the melodious tones of Sylvia Knight were unmistakable.

"The candidate," said she, "was to produce certain proofs of his sincerity upon this occasion. Let him produce them now."

Clew produced the signatures obtained of Mr. Arlington Dennett, and with a deep obeisance laid them upon the stand.

They were at once seized upon and eagerly examined by the probable Bat and Goebeling, who signified their satisfaction.

"You are still in Mr. Dennett's employ?" demanded the woman, addressing the candidate this time with directness.

"I am."

"The signatures offered are appended to no documents. By what means did you obtain them of one so chary of affording his name in writing?"

"By touching both his vanity and his fears. A suggestion that he might only be able to handle the pen with ignorant skill, or that incipient palsy might be overpowering his nerves, was sufficient to make those specimens forthcoming."

A murmur of approval went around the masked conclave, but the presiding female seemed to be less satisfied.

"You must," she said, "have become exceedingly confidential with your employer, to venture upon such liberties with him."

"It is true."

"How did you manage that?"

"I decline to state. The results are before the brethren; the rest is my private affair."

A dead silence followed, and the woman might be imagined as knitting her brows behind her silken mask, but no rebuke was administered.

"Your probation is at an end, your membership accepted," continued the ruling spirit, after a pause. "Kneel at the altar of the Black Stars, and affix your name to the register."

As the detective knelt an unforeseen fear possessed him; he had never seen the signature of the man he was counterfeiting, and some of those present might be familiar with it.

However, there was no time for hesitation, or, indeed, for reflection.

He seized the pen, and signed in character, in a bold and heavy hand.

The genuineness of the signature was fortunately not questioned, though the brethren pressed forward curiously to inspect it.

"This name is an alias, is it not?" demanded the chieftainess.

"It is," replied the candidate. "I have long since been disowned by my family, and scorn to use the family name."

"It is well; no objection is offered."

Then, the candidate still standing between his conductors, the expediency of proceeding with the Dennett job was freely discussed, the

members never addressing each other by name, so that the purpose of the detective was yet further baffled.

"How soon can the papers, with these signatures affixed, be got in readiness?" asked the chieftainess, after numerous details had been discussed.

"By Thursday next," replied the probable One-Eyed Thompson.

"And it is now Tuesday. Unless reasonable objections may be now offered, the removal of the 'bloke' shall be ordered for the following day, Friday."

"I submit that such removal of the 'bloke' might prove over hasty," suggested a small brother who had thus far taken no part in the conference. "The Lestrangle papers are being still held over, as being yet too green."

"So may these be held over," said the probable Bristol Bill. "Delay has never been the policy of the Order with regard to its removals."

"Let the legal and the judicial minds speak," said the chieftainess.

The probable Bat urged expedition, as did likewise the probable Dredger.

"It is ordered," said the chieftainess. "The order for the fresh removal stands. The executive committee will receive due notice of their appointment to carry out the Brotherhood's decree."

The murder of Mr. Dennett was thus inferentially fixed upon.

A fresh silence fell, and the chieftainess turned once more to the candidate.

"You have thus, Bunchy Fives," she said, "been admitted to a preliminary membership with our Brotherhood. But yet another test is required of you ere you become one of us, face to face, heart to heart, with no intervening masks. That test withstood triumphantly, you shall be conducted hither next Thursday night, when the papers in the Dennett case are to be submitted for approval, and be made personally known to all the brethren. Is this in accordance with your desires?"

"It is."

"The new test required of you is also one of blood. A recreant member of our Order is at present living in this city. His death has been determined on, and you are selected as the instrument. His name is Bob Sutton. You start; is the man known to you by reputation?"

"He is."

"Say what you know of him."

"Sutton was formerly the proprietor of the Darby and Joan, in Spruce street. He removed to a lower-caste hostelry in Madison street, and became associated with Hobdy, an English burglar. Both were arrested for a Brooklyn house-breaking. Hobdy effected his escape from the City Prison through bribery. Sutton was sent to Sing Sing for eight years. He has recently been pardoned out. That is all I know."

"Know this much further. He is now secretly harboring in a house known as Hell's Kitchen, next the engine-house lot in Greenwich village."

The candidate, to whom this information was by no means fresh, bowed.

"Between now and Thursday night, you will have accomplished this man's destruction. It is so ordered. You cannot choose but accept the duty; but the Brotherhood would like to know if you accept it willingly."

A secret chill had passed through the detective's veins, but he made no outward sign.

He sought, however, to gain time for secret deliberation.

"Before satisfying the Brotherhood on that point," he replied, collectedly, "I would prefer to satisfy myself on certain details."

"Speak; you shall be answered."

"Am I to be restricted as to weapons and means?"

"Not at all. The victim must simply come to his death between now and Thursday night next."

"If I should fail?"

"Your further advancement will be indefinitely postponed, as the penalty. You will be unable to know your new brethren face to face, and will likewise be debarred from sharing in our profits."

The detective bowed again.

"Do you accept the test?"

"I do."

"That is well. My dear brother, your conduct of to-night has been received by the Brotherhood with unalloyed satisfaction. The conclave is closed."

The lights were suddenly extinguished. Again the candidate felt himself seized by his conductors and hurried away.

Presently he experienced a suffocating sensation, as if caused by a drugged snuff thrown into his nostrils, and for a moment lost consciousness.

He recovered to find himself again standing under the street-lamp at the corner of the alleyway, alone.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE DARBY AND JOAN.

THE street was almost wholly deserted; it was midnight.

The detective felt as if he had been the victim of an evil dream.

He looked at his hands and wrists; the starred-marks had mysteriously faded away, without a trace.

Might not all that had followed be equally unsubstantial and unreal?

No, no; it was too true, too terrible.

He had succeeded in the wish of his heart; he was at length affiliated with the dreaded Black Star Gang; but at what fearful cost?

With perhaps one murder—or the hideously life-like semblance of one—already upon his soul; and the deliberate engagement to perpetrate yet another, and an indubitably real one, upon his conscience.

Of course, he had not the remotest idea of fulfilling the engagement, but none the less did his senses reel, his soul grow sick.

The fiendish capacities of the Black Stars had been proved beyond his wildest imagination.

Their formal discussion and arrangements for the commission of cold-blooded, dastardly, money-making assassination, dwelt in his mind like the impression of some hideously-fascinating romance of Venetian or Neapolitan diabolism in the Middle Ages.

He felt as if he had been consorting with demons and fiends.

Shaking off this sense of depression as he best could, he began to move mechanically up the street.

Feeny and Danny met him on an adjoining corner, according to previous agreement; but he had almost forgotten, and gazed at them with a bewildered air.

"What's up wid you, Cap?" wonderingly demanded the boy. "Have you been playin' for drinks with dead men, an' gone broke at the devil's bar-counter?"

There was no levity, but only genuine solicitude, in the lad's voice and manner, however uncouth his words.

"I must have the air," said the detective. "Keep me in sight, both of you."

He wandered on without aim or purpose, and presently, after somewhat recovering his accustomed nerve, found himself before a lighted drinking and chop-house window in an otherwise silent and deserted locality.

Sounds of jovial voices and the clink of glasses issued from the place.

An old-time sign-board creaked in the night-wind above his head.

But, even before glancing up at the sign, he had become shudderingly aware of the locality.

By the merest chance, he had come to pause before the Darby and Joan.

Or is there such a thing as Chance? Is it not but another name for a mysterious fore-ordination, or a predestinated fatality?

A moment later and our detective, at all events, was prepared to subscribe to such a belief.

A seedy-looking man was standing before the window, his hat dejectedly pulled down over his brows, his eyes hungrily feasting upon the oysters, salads and other delicacies there displayed.

The detective's compassion was easily aroused by a spectacle so significant of distress and destitution.

His hand instinctively sought his waistcoat pocket, and he was about to address the man, when the latter turned forlornly toward him.

Clew reeled back as if he had received a heavy blow.

Chance or Fate?

There before him was the man he had engaged to murder, at the instance of the diabolical Brotherhood!

A pitiful smile passed over the man's bloated and yet haggard face.

"Though I have no recollection of you, sir," said he, "I judge from your sudden start that I may have been known to you in my happier days."

The detective was gazing at him blankly, almost affrightedly; and he responded in a hollow voice, that seemed strange and unnatural even in his own ears.

"Who are you?" he asked, merely as a matter of form.

"I am Bob Sutton, once the jovial and carressed Boniface of this very establishment, from which I have just been ignominiously led out by a waiter for the offense of begging for a gratuitous drink."

The detective thrust a coin into the ruined publican's hand.

"Here, sir, take this, and welcome!" he hoarsely exclaimed. "But do not, I beg of you, follow me into this place—take yourself off to a great distance—you are in more danger, in deadlier danger than you can imagine."

And with that he hurried into the Darby and Joan, closing the door behind him with a nervous bang.

This hostelry, though a prominent sporting-resort at the period of which we write, with an old-time Free and Easy every Wednesday and Saturday night, was somewhat above the class most frequented by sporting and turbulent characters of the Bunchy Fives stamp, but there were still enough customers to greet the detective with a familiar nod as he entered in that

character and took a seat at one of the small tables.

"Half a dozen raw, on the shell, and a pewter," was the order.

And then when the waiter, a discreet-looking young fellow, reappeared and smiled communicatively under the influence of an effective tip, the detective asked, with affected carelessness:

"Wasn't that Sutton, the former proprietor, that I saw outside as I was coming in?"

"Yes, sir; very likely, sir. He tried to beg his lish at the bar a few minutes ago, and Mr. — ordered me to run him out. You see, Bob is something of a bum now, and I suppose, with an expressive shrug of the shoulders, 'you know as how he's been 'doing time?'"

"Yes—poor devil!"

"Oh, of course; but then a place has got to be kept respectable, you know."

The detective began to tackle his oysters and ale in a species of mild frenzy.

The forlorn face of the ruined publican haunted his thoughts pitifully, and he was still in a whirl of indecision as to how he might complete his affiliation with the Black Stars and at the same time evade the murder-test, which of course he intended to do at any cost, even including the entire defeat of his scheme to bring the gang to justice.

At this juncture there was a slight commotion outside, and several persons stepped into the street.

"Queer note that, sir!" said the waiter, stepping to the detective's side two or three moments later.

He looked up inquiringly.

"About the bum you was alludin' to a short time ago, sir—Bob Sutton, formerly of this here very Darby and Joan!"

"What of him?"

"Just dropped dead outside—probably a case of heart disease."

The detective mastered his astonishment with difficulty and hastily quitted the saloon.

Chance or Fate once more?

The dead ex-landlord of the Darby and Joan lay where he had fallen, directly under the lighted show-window whose tempting garniture and display had once constituted his professional pride.

The police had already been notified, and among the small group surrounding the pitiful remains were Feeny and Danny.

It was evident that they had been witnesses of the man's death, though both were careful not to recognize their chief in his fictitious character.

The latter was regarding the remains with such strange emotions as can be readily imagined, when a rough, sinister-looking man, whom he could not remember to have ever seen before, touched his elbow and motioned him to draw apart.

"You're a brick!" whispered the stranger. "The Black Star injunction is hardly cold, and yet you've fulfilled it to the letter already."

Clew began to comprehend.

"Hark you, friend," said he, assuming a stern and mysterious air. "It'll be called heart-disease, or perhaps kidney complaint; but the truth as to his taking off is my secret."

"Oh, of course! but I'd give a finger to know how you effected it so sly. Why," with a burst of admiration, "you're a genius! There isn't one of the Gang but will envy you at the next conclave."

"It is my secret, I tell you!"

"All right; you're a dandy novice, you are, sure!"

And the fellow slunk away.

Clew felt almost like a *bona-fide* murderer.

Still, he knew that, in receiving credit with the Brotherhood for having in some secret way contrived the marked man's death, his position would be greatly strengthened, and he resolved to make the most of it.

The next thing was to prevent the fact of Algernon Knight having shared the ex-publican's secret retreat being made public.

As he stepped back to the saloon door some policemen were just arriving with a stretcher, and he found an opportunity to speak privately with Feeny.

"You remember the dead man of old, Feeny?"

"I knew him well in his better days, your Honor."

"Whether anything is found in the remains or not, indicating the man's latest residence, do you claim the custody of the body, on the score of ancient friendship. I'll see you through with the funeral expenses."

"I'll do it, sor."

"Under no circumstances must the body be taken to Hell's Kitchen, where the man has last been harboring."

"I understand."

"Report at my lodgings at nine in the morning, and bring Danny along."

"Trust in your Feeny, captain."

As the detective turned the nearest street corner on his way home, he saw his strange in-

* A fact as to the close of this old-time New York publican's career.

terlocutor of a few moments before under a public lamp in company with two other strangers.

They nodded approvingly, and even admiringly, as he passed.

"I'm in strange luck," thought the detective. "The name, even without the game, seems to go a good way with a fraternity in which cold-blooded assassination is ever at a premium."

CHAPTER XXIII.

IN GREENWICH VILLAGE.

THE detective, when at home, occupied modest lodgings not far from the corner of Broadway and Canal street, a locality as far uptown in the consideration of fifty years ago as Forty-second street is regarded at the present day.

After a fine night's rest, and while taking breakfast in his own proper character, he was waited upon by his faithful henchmen, Feeny and Danny Crook.

The former he dispatched to Brooklyn, with instructions to keep an eye alternately on Sylvia's house and the residence of Mr. Dennett until further orders.

Danny he sent off to Greenwich Village (now the populous and conservative Ninth Ward) to await his own appearance in the vicinity of Hell's Kitchen.

It should be mentioned, however, that Feeny had first reported the quiet conveyance of Bob Sutton's remains to his (Feeny's) house in the Five Points, where preparations were already under way for their decent burial, after the necessary inquest should have been held.

Having thus disposed of his followers, Clew transacted a little official business with his chief at Headquarters, and then proceeded to the precinct station where his unfortunate prototype, Bunchy Fives, was languishing in durance vile.

Bunchy glared resentfully through his prison grating at his unexpected visitor.

He still wore his fireman's red shirt and high boots, for lack of access to a nobbier costume, and his heavy fire-hat was lying neglected in one corner of his miserable little whitewashed cell.

"Hallo, Cap!" cried the prisoner; "it's you, eh?"

"Yes, Bunchy, it's me."

"What sort of star-chamber job is this they're puttin' up on me, Cap? I ain't done nothing, an' here they've kept me stowed away like a wild animal ever since they yanked me out of Moli's den without a minute's warnin'?"

"What was the charge, Bunchy?—fighting again, shoving the queer, or on general principles?"

"That's what I want to know, Cap, but not a cop of 'em will make me any the wiser. I swear to God I haven't broken a law since that last scrap of mine two months ago! Nary a fight, or even a turn of a card, and, as for shovin' the queer, I haven't of my own knowledge seen the side of wild-cat money inside of six weeks. Gospel truth, Cap!"

"Well, I'll try to see about it."

"Holy smoke! but I'm dyin' by inches here, Cap, an' they won't pay any attention to my demand for examination."

"This does seem arbitrary."

"Arbitrary! Why, they won't even carry a message for me to the members of my fire company, who must think me dead. I can't even get a bottle of rum—think of that!"

"Pretty rough, Bunchy. By the way, isn't Mr. Bat, the big lawyer, some relation to you?"

"Curse him! yes—my brother-in-law. No hope there, Cap: I'm the black sheep, you know. I really believe the sanctimonious old vulture would chuckle to hear of me being hanged, if it wasn't for his sharing in the family disgrace."

"Oho! so bad as that?"

"Yes, and worse, too. But the boys at the engine-house would chip in to bail me out, I know they would, if they could only know of my being here, and there would only be some charges made against me."

"Hard luck, Bunchy; but you know the law's delays in these matters."

"Not when a feller's got a 'pull,' as I ought to have. If even Alderman Fake or Judge Dredger knew of my predicament— Hold on, Cap, don't go! For God's sake, don't desert me!"

"But it's out of my province, Bunchy. I can't interfere with the regulars, and never try to."

"Promise me something, Cap."

"If I can."

"When shall I get out, or have an examination, which will be the same thing?"

The detective knitted his brows reflectively.

"By Saturday, at the furthest; I'll promise that."

"Saturday, and it's now only Wednesday!" The entrapped hero of the Bloody Sixth hurled himself against the grating with a sort of howl. "Jerusalem! and I haven't even had a nip for two days."

"Control yourself, Bunchy."

"Control the devil! Then," with a sort of

settled despair, "won't you do anything for me, Cap?"

"Yes, I shall do something. I remember you as not a bad fellow on two or three occasions. True, it would be out of my line to carry a message for you, but—"

"But what?"

"You shall have all the drink you desire while you remain here."

"What!" with a gratified yell; "you don't mean it?"

"I shall see to it at once," and Clew made his escape out of the corridor, with the grateful Bunchy calling down blessings on his head as long as his voice could be heard.

"Morning, Cap!" saluted the captain of the precinct as the detective made his appearance into the private office a few moments later.

"Been taking a look at Bunchy?"

"Yes."

"Well, no wonder he finds it hard," with an official smile. "He hasn't had word with a soul from outside since we gathered him in—might as well be dead and buried out of sight and mind. Your wishes have been carried out to the letter."

"Thanks. Nothing could be better. I've promised him an examination by Saturday, which will of course be equivalent to an acquittal, since there's no real charge, as far as I know."

"None whatever. Saturday be it, then. He's booked till then."

"If he should escape in the interim, or even get word to his friends, it would be fatal to my plans."

"Don't think of it. Double precautions, I tell you; and he's as good as under ground till you say the word."

"Thank you again. I have promised Bunchy a favor, however."

"Name it."

"All the spirits he can punish. Pray, let there be no delay."

"Not ten minutes. He shall float in rum, from this hour, since it's your request. Morning, Cap."

An hour later the detective approached the house rejoicing in the designation of Hell's Kitchen.

It was in the then Greenwich Village, just off the present Christopher street, and not far from the Amos street dock, destined to become famous twenty years later for the all-but historical rough-and-tumble fight between John Morrissey, alias "Old Smoke," and Bill Poole, the typical Native American bruiser and tough.

The detective's *avant courier*, Danny Crook, was awaiting his principal, seated upon a neighboring fire-plug, whence he was delectating a nondescript audience of lads and striplings before the adjoining engine-house with legends of fire lore pertaining to his native heath in the Fourth and Sixth Wards.

He hastily joined his chief, however, at a beck from the latter.

"All quiet in de Kitchen, Cap," he reported, in a low voice. "Not even a fight or a woman's squeal since I came on duty."

"Anything known of Sutton's death as yet?"

"Not a word. Fact is, hardly any one knowed him 'round here, 'cept a rather well-dressed, wild-lookin' galoot what bunked with him on the top floor, back."

"Ah, is that the den?"

"Yes, Cap."

"Be sure to remain somewhere within call."

Then the detective entered the house in question, a three-storied, squalid tenement, numerous and variously occupied.

As he mounted the rickety stairs vicious and sodden faces peered out at him and were gone again, for as a city detective of stern reputation he was known and dreaded by the evil-doers of many localities.

At last he knocked peremptorily at a door on the top landing.

It was cautiously opened by Sylvia's husband himself, whose anxious face straightway brightened.

"Oh, you *have* come, haven't you? I'm glad of it! Come in, sir."

It was a miserably-destitute room, furnished with two pallets, as many chairs, and a deal table, on which was scattered the remains of some coarse food.

"I told you I would come, Knight, and I always keep my word," said Clew, brusquely, as he appropriated one of the chairs offered him. "But why are you specially glad of my arrival?"

Then he remarked that the hunted, watchful expression had deepened in the man's haggard face.

"Because, sir," and Knight edged his chair closer, while casting a cautious look at the window, "I have reason to fear that they've tracked and are watching for me."

"They! who?"

"The Gang, sir—Sylvia's crowd!"

"The devil!" and the detective started up.

"That might be fatal to me, no less than to you. What makes you think so?"

The man drew him to the window, and cautiously drew back one side of the miserable rag that curtained it after a fashion.

"There!" he said, pointing with a trembling hand. "D'y'e mark that gable window betwixt the two tall chimneys?"

CHAPTER XXIV.

A NEW FOLLOWER SECURED.

THE window of the room in which the detective and his companion were standing overlooked the roofs and chimney-pots of several neat cottages, and was on a direct line with the gable window indicated by Knight.

This belonged to a house of superior pretensions, that, with its rear garden, backed up to a narrow alleyway from an adjoining street, mainly occupied by very decent dwellings.

"Yes, I see the window," said Clew, impatiently. "What of it?"

"All day yesterday this room was being stealthily watched from that gable window," said Knight, solemnly. "Even after I got back from Brooklyn in the evening—according to your orders, as you will remember—the watch continued."

"Indeed! Well, there's no watch being kept up from that window now. That is obvious. When did it cease?"

"About the time my friend Bob left the room, say ten o'clock last night."

"You've nothing to fear, you rabbit!" exclaimed Clew, drawing a long breath of relief. "It was Sutton who was being watched, not you."

"What! you really think so?" and Knight also drew a relieved sigh.

"It stands to reason, from what you tell me. Moreover, I am pretty certain of it on other grounds."

"But why should Bob have feared a hounding down?"

"For the same reason that you do."

"Ha!"

"He had betrayed his whilom criminal associates, or was suspected of doing so, which amounted to the same thing."

"What associates were they?"

"The same, or a part of the same, that are bent on destroying you—the criminal Brotherhood of the Black Star."

The hiding man turned white.

"Of course I can't dispute your word, captain," he faltered, "but it's the solemn truth that Bob Sutton never gave me the least hint to this effect. Good Lord! if he had—"

"Well, if he had?"

Knight still hesitated.

"If he had done so," continued the detective, "I suppose you would have dreaded to accept his shelter and assistance, much as you needed both."

"It is true, sir; cowardly as it may seem to acknowledge it, it is none the less true. Thunder and lightning! it's hard enough to look out for one's own skin when hunted down by hell-hounds, let alone mixing up one's own fate with another marked man's."

"You're not greatly out of the way there."

"I should say not! Why, I'd sooner take my running luck against all the legal detectives on earth than against a band of men who were once my pals bent on revenge!"

"Well, perhaps Sutton's danger was a foil for your own peril, after all. And the poor devil is, fortunately, out of harm's way at last."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"He is dead."

The fellow really felt the blow.

"Oh, Lord!" he ejaculated; "but it must have been sudden. Poor Bob!"

Clew briefly related the particulars.

Knight's emotion over his old pal's death was evidently heartfelt.

"Knight," said the detective, after a reflective pause, "you have perhaps surmised my task of bringing these infernal Black Stars to justice."

"I have, sir," was the humble reply. "And, as God is my judge, I earnestly hope you will succeed!"

"Do you mean that?"

"I do, sir. The oath of such a scoundrel as I may be no better than his word, but I have no other assurance to give. I do hope you may, sir."

"Are you my man?"

Knight looked up with an incredulous air.

"I mean just what I say, and I've been deliberating over it for the last five minutes—a long deliberation for me."

"Please explain clearly, sir. You see, sir, I—I have been a villain pretty much all my life."

"Will you be my man in this venture, through thick and thin, live or die? That's what I mean. Fidelity and implicit, unquestioning obedience—that would constitute my demand. In return for your service, I promise you protection and a new bright chance. Neither shall I demand the secret of Maggy's parentage before the hour that was agreed on—the hour that shall witness the overthrow of the Black Stars; for a bargain once entered into I have ever regarded as a sacred thing. Speak, Algernon Knight. Are you henceforth my man, or are you not?"

The veteran criminal and ex-convict had been watching him with a new look in his worn, bad face—a new something that seemed to even redeem it in a measure, if such could be.

Suddenly he fell on his knees, the tears, real tears, rolling down his cheeks.

"By God, I will be your man, Captain Clew!" was all he could falter.

"Up with you, then!" said the detective, bustling to his feet. "Here!" he produced a wig and false side-whiskers; "I see you are newly shaved and trimmed, so let me see you put these on. There!" after Knight had assumed the disguise with a practiced hand; "that is something like; and your new clothes can scarcely have become familiar with any of your fellow-tenants as yet."

"There's hardly a soul of 'em that had come to know me by sight," eagerly cried the transformed jail-bird, already rejuvenated in his spirits.

"So much the better. Henceforth, until further orders, you are my London friend, Mr. Gernon, which is the best piece out of your first name. Got any funds?"

"A few pennies, sir. Poor Bob! after paying for my new rig, he went dead broke at roulette, and—"

"That will do, Gernon. Here!" the detective poured a handful of silver into the man's hands. "You had better keep on roosting right here, at least for the present. Wait!"

He opened the door, stepped to the landing, and sounded a shrill whistle.

It was responded to by Danny, who came rolling and shouldering his way up the creaking flights with as much enthusiasm as if beacons by a conflagration, with a woman and six children signaling for help under the topmost eaves.

"Danny, this is Mr. Gernon, a London friend of mine," said the detective, curtly. "Know each other, for you're to work in the same harness. Now take a walk together for half an hour. I'll remain here till you return."

For the Fighting Detective to speak was to be obeyed.

Alone in the room, he seated himself at the window, and devoted himself to stealthily and sedulously studying the gable casement to which his attention had been directed by Knight.

He still had some doubts in that regard, and was determined to put them to rest.

The curtain of the window under observation was raised, and a man and woman occasionally appeared at it, perhaps now and then throwing a glance in his direction, but no more than that.

The detective presently became satisfied of two things.

These were, first, that Knight's room was no longer under surveillance from that quarter, and next, that the entire house to which the gable window belonged was the abode of suspicious characters.

The first conclusion would be accounted for from the fact and knowledge of Bob Sutton having already paid the penalty with his life, doubtless supposedly at the ordered assassin's hands; the next presented a number of circumstances to support it, chief of which was a general suggestion of furtiveness in its inmates.

With the exception of the one in the gable, all the windows presented to view were jealously shuttered close, though it was evident that one or more of these also occasionally had a watchful pair of eyes peering out secretly through the cautiously manipulated slats.

Even a servant who at intervals made her appearance in the garden-yard seemed to do so skulkingly, and to be in haste to be back under cover as speedily as possible.

The detective was presently confirmed in these suspicions by a man stepping out into the yard whom he instantly recognized as Jem Gorgio.

"Oho!" he thought, rubbing his hands mechanically; "we're getting hot, as the urchins say at hide-and-seek."

The Gypsy man wore his hat and was smartly dressed for the street.

He remained smoking for a moment, as if merely taking a general outlook, and then disappeared, after tossing away the stub of his cigar.

Another figure presently appeared, the graceful figure of a young girl.

As her face was turned to view, the detective uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

It was Maggy!

CHAPTER XXV.

AN UNLOOKED-FOR ADVENTURE.

AT first he could scarcely believe his eyes; but there could be no doubt as to the face and figure presented.

Maggy it was, and none other but Maggy; and, moreover, with a forlorn, saddened expression, as well as he could make out, that went to his heart.

For the first time he reached for an opera-glass, that he was seldom without, but was too late.

Before he could bring it to bear the servant came running to the door, apparently giving some order or warning in a peremptory tone, and the young girl disappeared into the house, though with evident reluctance.

The detective was momentarily bewildered. What could it all mean?

Had Sylvia discovered the girl's temporary escape from the strong-room, and summarily dispatched her to this new retreat both for greater security and in the way of punishing her disobedience?

Yes; doubtless that was it. And yet, wait! Would Sylvia have had time for this, in view of her experience with the apparition, and her subsequent presence (as he did not for an instant question) at the masked conclave?

No, hardly; but she might have effected the young girl's removal subsequently, on her return to Brooklyn.

However, here Maggy was, come here how she might; and that was the chief and astounding consideration.

Then Jem Gorgio, too!

The detective with difficulty mastered a jealous pang as he remembered the fellow's passion for the young girl, no less than what he had been told of Sylvia's threat to marry her to him—that she should only quit her prison permanently to step to the altar as that ruffian's bride.

Good heavens! might the hideous threat already have been carried out?

Brief as was the space allotted, might the forced marriage already have taken place?

The thought, preposterous as it would have seemed in a calmer moment, was enough to make Clew's blood run cold.

He ground his teeth.

However, it was no time for idiotic anger: never before was cool, scheming and deliberate thought more required.

He knitted his brows and set himself to cold, hard thinking.

While thus engaged, Danny and "Gernon" returned.

After some further deliberation, he acquainted them unreservedly with the discoveries he had made.

Knight received the communication with grave seriousness, Danny with characteristic enthusiasm.

"It's a case, boss," said he, with a sling of his immense shoulders, "of a beautiful princess in the dumps, such as I've read of in them yellow-kivered literatures, an' you're the derring-do cuss what's fated to yank her out of the mussy."

"I must certainly find means to communicate with the young lady, and the sooner the better," said the detective, without encouraging the lad's good-natured attempt at levity.

"All right, Cap!" and Danny forthwith started for the door.

"Hold on! where are you going?"

"To find means for yer to communerate. Ain't that what you're achin' for?"

"Yes; but how shall you furnish me with the means?"

"Oh, easy enough. Just leave it to me, Cap, and wait."

"Stop, sir! How shall you do it?"

"By emptyin' that house yonder of its inmates, or the worst part of 'em, so as you kin slip in over the back fences, and get word with the young gal."

"But how will you empty the house?"

"By setting fire to the blacksmith's-shop what fronts it," and he again started to go. "Just wait till we git the fu'st stream on, with mebbe a good old-fashioned firemen's fight throwed in, an' you'll see all the folks of the same street either piling out on the dead jump, or stufin' the front winders with scared faces in a jiffy."

"Stop, you rascal! how dare you make such a proposition to me, an officer of the law?"

"But the shop's empty, boss. I know this Greenwich like a book. I onc't had an uncle what kept a slaughter-house just this side—"

"Enough of this!" sternly. "You'll set fire to nothing, you unconscionable little ruffian!"

Danny's face fell, but as quickly brightened up again.

"How about an alarm—only a false alarm, you know, boss?"

"That might be admissible."

Danny disappeared with a subdued whoop, and was next heard tearing down the stairs.

"I have made myself familiar with the back yard of this house, sir," said Knight, who had evidently been deliberating the matter. "When the opportunity occurs, I can show you how to reach the alley-way, and thence make your way into yonder garden."

Clew eyed him searchingly.

"I shall trust you to do it," said he, after a slight pause. "It will be a good test, not only of your sincerity, but of your usefulness, Knight—or I must remember to say, Gernon."

"And I am eager to be put to the test, sir," was the reply. "Somehow you have inspired me with feelings and ambitions that I don't remember to have known before, and I am anxious to vindicate your generous confidence in such a man as you know me to have been."

"Good!"

"And I would say further, sir, that no matter by what treachery or cruelty on the part of Sylvia my little Mag may have been spirited—"

"Don't!" interrupted the detective, fiercely. "You haven't the right! She isn't *your* Maggy, and you know it!"

The man stood abashed.

"All right, sir. But I must be permitted to say that any indignity put upon the young girl by that infernal she-fiend of a wife of mine" (he here burst into a series of epithets not to be reproduced) "can hardly rouse your hatred and indignation any more than mine. Oh, I'll be even with that woman yet!" and he worked his thin fingers convulsively.

"That is all very well, Gernon; but you must keep cool. Nothing is ever accomplished in a passionate, unreasoning way."

They again turned their attention to the gable window.

A woman was now seated at it, her eyes bent upon some needlework in which she was industriously engaged.

Presently a man came, and bent earnestly over her.

Clew brought his opera-glass to bear.

"An evil face, but I don't recognize it," he muttered. "Yes, I do—Captain Farnham's, as I live! Oh!"

He gave a low whistle, no more intelligible than the words themselves to his companion.

But Clew remembered Farnham's secret intrigue with the "grass widow," and pieced it with the likelihood of the woman at the window being his wife.

"Can you mark those two faces distinctly, Gernon?"

"As plainly as you can with the glass, I think, sir. My eyesight is of the best."

"Well, fasten them in your mind. You may have to remember them on occasion."

Just then there was a hubbub of noises, accompanied by a cry of "Fire!" over on the adjoining street, and the figures hastily disappeared.

Then a sudden flash, followed by a column of smoke, sprung up over the roofs.

The detective's brow darkened.

"Curse the boy's disobedience!" he exclaimed; "it's a real fire—the temptation has been too great for him, after all. However, no time is to be lost. Lead the way, Gernon!"

The neighboring fire bell clanged out the alarm as they dashed down the rickety stair-flights, already thronged with Hell's Kitcheners hurrying to the street, and by the time they reached the back yard the entire space between the house-rears seemed to be completely deserted.

The tenants all round had hurried to the front, either to witness the conflagration in their immediate vicinity, or to be drawn around to it from the neighboring thoroughfares.

"Follow me, sir!" said Knight. "We've a clear field, and I'm pretty sure I know the way."

He moved with much more spryness than could have been expected of his recent enfeebled condition, and the detective followed him over a fence, a cottage-garden, and yet another fence into the alleyway before mentioned, and which it was now observed communicated somewhat tortuously with Christopher street.

Thence, by forcing a small door set in a brick wall, they found themselves in the desired yard, with the basement-entrance of the gable-house open before them.

"This will do," said Clew, authoritatively. "Attend to my instructions."

"Speak, sir."

"Secure a hackney-coach instantly—there is a stand near by—and bring it through the alley-way, if possible; if not, have it in waiting at the alley corner."

Knight darted out of the gate again without a word.

The detective traversed the yard, and entered the house.

It was a shallow basement, he had stepped into a kitchen, and could see into the adjoining dining-room, where a man, a woman and a young girl were crowding at a window to look out upon the opposite conflagration and the exciting incidents connected with it.

The woman was evidently the servant, the man might or might not be Gorgio, and, as for the young girl, but a glance at the rear of her symmetrical figure was enough to convince the detective that it was Maggy.

How to attract her attention without startling her, or exciting the suspicions of her companions, was the master-difficulty.

He stealthily approached the group, until near enough to look over their shoulders into the street, which presented a turbulent and exciting scene of what might be called a firemen's saturnalia.

Two rival machines were pouring their streams into the blazing shanty, with Danny assisting at one of the butts, while a group of red-shirted, fire-batted men and boys were engaging in a splendid fist-fight over a bursted hose, the roar of the multitude combining with the crackling of the flames and the pumping of the engines to make a hubbub that was little short of deafening.

The moment seemed as favorable as any that might arise for the detective.

He cautiously touched Maggy on the shoulder.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE RESCUE.

SHE turned without an exclamation, the detective placing his finger across his lips as she did so.

A glad, hopeful light leaped into the girl's pale face, and she with difficulty mastered the expression of her emotion.

He signed to her that she was to follow him with the utmost circumspection, and he would accomplish her rescue.

Like the veriest shadow she stole to his side, silently placing her hand in his, without arousing the attention of the man and woman at the window.

But the pair had just turned to beat their silent retreat when a fierce oath was heard, and Farnham, pistol in hand, stood at a side door to confront them.

"Quick, Jem, summon the gang!" he exclaimed. "We've got the devil into a trap, if we're of a mind to spring it."

As Farnham spoke he snapped his pistol full at Clew's breast, though it fortunately missed fire, while the man at the window, who proved to be Jem Gorgio, rushed to his assistance, sounding a low but piercing call as he did so, and the woman, picking up a heavy rolling-pin, made a snarling sort of a dive for Maggy.

"Stick to me, and don't be alarmed," the detective had time to say to his fair companion in a hoarse aside.

Then, while the tramp of many feet was heard upon the adjoining stair, the Gypsy was caught by a short-arm blow between the eyes, that sent him reeling back, while the rolling-pin, snatched from the woman's hands and sent flying, struck Farnham, end on, in the bread-basket so effectively that he was doubled up with pain and *hors du combat* for the moment.

But reinforcements for the ruffians, plunging from above like an avalanche in the adjoining hallway, were already at hand.

Just then, however, Clew sounded his own signal out of the window, and had the satisfaction of catching Danny's eye from amid the confusion of the street.

"Danny, the Gang!" he exclaimed. "To the rescue!"

Then, as he turned, it seemed that upward of a dozen ruffians were bursting in upon him by the two doors.

There was just time to throw Maggy behind him, place his back to the street, and throw up his fists.

Then it was that the young girl, peeping tremblingly and large-eyed with wonder out behind, witnessed for the first time the fistic prowess of her champion to the full, which was little short of miraculous, and has been handed down to us by tradition as one of the seven wonders of Old New York, if not of the present century.

There was simply an unbroken series of lightning-like passes, a shoulder-hitting blow at every pass, and as many battered eyes, split noses and broken heads were the result as naturally as rolling off a log.

It was a combination of the fly-wheel, buzz-saw and piston-rod movements, with elbow-grease as the lubricating medium, cool indomitableness as the fuel, and pugilistic necromancy as the motive power, such as is privileged to be seen but once, if at all, in any age, and in comparison with which the athletics of the Olympian Games were but child's play and jack-straws.

Still, it was naturally wearing work for the performer, and the Fighting Detective felt himself being forced closer and closer back upon his *protegee*, notwithstanding that there was not one of his thronging assailants but had bitten the carpet at least once, while the majority had but scrambled to their feet to go down again.

"Lead and steel!" yelled Gypsy Jim, flourishing a carving-knife at last. "Cut him down! Remember Sylvia's injunction—we are lost if the girl gets into his hands!"

Other deadly weapons were brought into requisition, and then they made a combined rush upon the single man at bay, as might a tumbling pack of ravenous wolves upon a doomed and surrounded hunter amid Siberian woods.

But it was in Clew's favor that they imagined him desirous of escaping by the front, rather than by the back, of the premises.

And just at that critical instant, with a whoop that might have been heard a mile away, Danny Crook burst in at the head of his fire-laddie toughs to the rescue of his chief.

"Clean 'em out!" yelled the boy, leading the way, spanner in hand. "Knock a bale of hay out of 'em!"

Instantly the narrow room and adjoining passage seemed fairly choked with waving spanners, trumpets and brawny fists, and the detective's assailants were borne back, though still contesting the lost ground inch by inch.

In the confusion Captain Clew quietly tucked

the young girl under his arm, and gained the back yard.

Two fresh ruffians started up to oppose his passage to the alley-door.

There were just as many successive blows with his deadly right duke, and they were prostrate and senseless on the area bricks.

As the detective passed through the door, with the half-fainting Maggy under his protecting wing, a woman who had stationed herself just outside pointed to a close coach that had just driven up at the junction of the alleyway and the street.

A pale, care-worn and still attractive woman, the detective instantly recognized as the one he had seen with Farnham in the gable window.

"Hurry!" she panted. "I'm glad the child is being rescued—it was barbarous to bring her among us here!"

The detective paused.

"Are you Farnham's wife?" he demanded, most in a whisper.

She nodded.

"Do you know that he is playing you false—nightly making love in Brooklyn to Sylvia Knight, the Queen of the Black Stars?"

"No! Good God, sir! can it be true?"

"It is true. Be wary. If you should want a friend, remember Captain Clew, of the detective force."

She had staggered against the wall, pallid and staring.

He could do no more than pity her as he hurried away.

A moment later, safely ensconced in the coach with his precious charge, and with Knight beside the driver on the box, he was being rapidly whirled away.

"Where are we going?" presently murmured Maggy, slowly coming out of the semi-faint into which she had fallen. "Whither are you taking me?"

But it was not only at his side, it was also in his arms, that she came to the full realization of it all.

"Dear Captain!" she whispered, hiding her returning blushes in his bosom; "my Captain!" And she nestled yet closer.

If ever there had been a hard-won bliss, the detective felt that it was his in that ecstatic moment.

"I am taking you to friends, to safety, to honor!" he answered, pressing his lips to her sweet brow. "Don't talk now—not just at present; only lie quietly right here and love, love, love me!"

She gave a tired little sigh, still nestling closer.

Then she began to pass wondering touches over his brawny arms and sinewy hands.

"Dear, dear, dear! what a man, what a man! you must be of iron—an iron and steel man, inspired by a sort of unconquerableness!"

"No, no, my darling!" he laughed. "Only the softest sort of a chap, inspired only by love and happiness, when with you."

Presently she started up.

"Oh, I have not even a hat or a bonnet on!" she exclaimed, in real distress. "What will be thought of me?"

He laughed again.

"There'll be hardly any one but me to think of you at all," said he, kissing her once more. "And I shall think of you always as only the dear, darling little enchantress that you are!"

"But where are you taking me to?"

"To our matron at Headquarters first, where you shall be provided with a disguise. After that"—he had been deliberating the matter, and had come to a determination at last—"to the house of a friend who knows your story, and will be kind and generous, I am sure."

"But where—do tell me just where?"

"To the protection of Mr. Emil Lestrangle."

She drew back in some consternation.

"What—next door to madam's? Oh, that will not be safe! not there, not there!"

"Yes; for it is just there that you will be safest, and your hiding-place the least suspected—that is, if I can succeed in getting you under his roof, as I hope to, without attracting observation from outside. Don't worry, my darling; I have thought the whole thing out."

Here the coach came to a pause at the Police Headquarters of that day.

He lost no time in hurrying his charge into the matron's care, after bidding his new coadjutor to dismiss the coach and secure a fresh one, whose driver's discretion was such as could certainly be depended upon.

The matron had also received her instructions, and when Clew and Maggy rejoined each other in Mrs. —'s private parlor a little later, a transformation had taken place in the appearance of each.

Maggy was a little old Quakeress, with her youthful face all but buried out of sight in the recesses of a deep, sober-hued bonnet of noticeable ugliness—a quaint picture in drab-unworldliness that might just have stepped out of the oldest Friends' meeting-house in the city of Brotherly Love.

Clew was no less transformed into a personality with which the reader is already acquainted.

In spite of what she had passed through, the young girl clapped her drab-mittened little hands together, and burst into a merry laugh.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MAGGY TELLS HER NEW STORY.

"I do declare I hardly recognized you!" she exclaimed.

"And you are hardly more recognizable, if as much," was the smiling response. "Who are you now?"

"Sister Broadbrim, at your service, sir. How do you like my—my garb?"

"Capital! couldn't be better—that is, as a monstrosity."

"I thank thee, young man. And whom mayst thee be now?"

"Mr. Dennett's private secretary, the young Mr. Luxmore, may it please you, ma'm. Do you find my fashioning becoming?"

"Excellently well—for a clerk."

Then they both laughed together, and Maggy ran up to the motherly matron to kiss her goodbye, which was bestowed with a girlish gratefulness that brought a soft look into the good woman's face.

"Now to business, for it will take us a good hour to reach our destination," said the detective, when they were seated in the fresh coach, on their way to Brooklyn. "Tell me everything, my dear."

"I don't know as I can consecutively," said Maggy, her troubled look returning. "Everything happened in such a whirl—I still feel bewildered with it all."

"Let me help you out with my questions. When did Sylvia take you to that house where I found you by such a fortunate accident?"

"Some time long past midnight—that is, she sent me."

"Ah! then Sylvia remained behind?"

"Yes."

"And Jane Gorgio, too?"

"I suppose so. At all events, neither of them accompanied me."

"Who then?"

"Jem Gorgio, another man and a strange woman—the same that was looking out of the basement window with him. She is a sort of servant or housekeeper there, and, I think, a bold, bad and heartless woman."

"But handy with a rolling-pin, if allowed to have her way, as you must admit."

"Oh, my darling, my hero!" and the soft youthful arms were twining about the detective's neck. "What are rolling-pins, or even knives and pistols, when opposed to *you*?"

The endearment caused a slight interruption in the "business" of the hour, but the detective presently found opportunity to continue his queries.

"Then Sylvia must have discovered your escape from the strong-room, I judge; and that incensed her into sending you away under the escort of that blackguard, Jem Gorgio."

"Yes; that was just it."

"Now tell me the story."

"Well, I had slipped back unperceived into the strong-room, after separating from you, and was undressing, when madam suddenly entered, lamp in hand."

"She was thoroughly collected, but so pale and haggard! It frightened me a little, though not exactly for myself. I had never seen her so before. She looked as if she had seen a ghost."

"So she had, or a very strong resemblance to one."

Maggy stared inquiringly.

"Excuse the interruption, and pray proceed, my love," urged the detective, taking her hand. "It will be my turn for explanations presently."

"I saw at a glance that she divined my having been absent from the room. So I made no attempt at denial when she taxed me with it."

"You have no right to imprison me like a slave," I said to her. "You are neither my mother nor my mistress. I but submit to your exactions when I can't help myself, and shall escape them at every opportunity."

"Anger did not get the better of her, as on the previous occasion—not furious anger, I mean. She was calm, but with a sort of concentrated quietness that caused me secret uneasiness."

"I am your mother, for all that you may say, or think to the contrary," she replied. "But that is not here or there at the present. That I am likewise your mistress, well capable of punishing your ingratitude and disobedience, you will find to your cost."

"What shall you do with me?" I asked, for her manner increased my anxiety. "You cannot force me into a marriage, as you threatened, in this free country. Moreover, the villain you threatened to unite me with is a professional robber, and, for aught I know, a professional murderer, too."

"She gave me a dark look."

"I shall not have taken you in hand too soon, Miss Malapert, said she. 'Another rendezvous with that detective-lover of yours might be fatal to more persons than yourself. Fool! not to know that he is merely wheedling you to your ruin.'

"To this I replied indignantly, as you may believe."

"It matters nothing now," she went on. "It is for Jem Gorgio's bride that I design you, and he shall carry you away from this place to a securer one before the darkness of this night is spent. I shall personally see to your nuptials with him at a later period—perhaps to-morrow."

"She then summoned Jane, and was giving her instructions for my temporary custody (for she did not seem to suspect that Jane herself had assisted me to my brief enjoyment of liberty) when something in the latter's looks and manner attracted her attention."

"Indeed, Jane was looking strangely flurried and upset, as I had observed myself from the first."

"What is the matter with you?" demanded madam. "You look so strange." "So do you, ma'm," retorted Jane, a little sullenly. "I was wishing to ask the same explanation of you, ma'm." Madam gave a start, looked at her curiously, and then drew her to one side.

"Have you seen It, too?" I overheard her ask in a troubled whisper. Jane nodded, and took on a scared look—a most unusual thing for Jane, whom I had always believed as insensible to fear as my moth—as madam herself. "What was It like?" inquired madam, pitching her voice yet lower.

"Jane replied at considerable length, though in words that I couldn't distinguish. They whispered together a little further, and then came back to me, when madam, who appeared in haste to get away, completed her instructions for my safe-keeping until her return."

"But Jane, much to my delight, though she promised to keep me a prisoner, actually flew into a passion when Jem's marriage to me was again alluded to, and even swore that such a thing should never be, if she could prevent it."

"Madam gave her a venomous look, and, between her anger at this opposition (evidently unlooked-for) and her haste to get away, seemed to control herself with much difficulty."

"Don't cross me, Jane Gorgio!" she snapped out. "Why, Jem is your own brother!" "Bad luck to me for that," replied Jane. "And I'll cross you all the more for it in this business." "You're a fool! And, moreover, Jem is madly in love with the child." "It sha'n't be done, if I can prevent, I tell you, ma'm; and you know the reason why." Madam glared, but managed to keep her temper in hand. "At least," she said at last, "you won't cross me in having him carry her away from here?" "No," Jane replied, after a pause, "that will not hurt her. Have your will in that, ma'm. Almost any place is better for her than this horrible haunted hole!"

"Here there was heard a carriage drive up to the gate, and madam hurried away, after receiving a repeated assurance of fidelity from Jane."

"After she was gone, I tried to get Jane to tell me where I was to be taken to, but she refused to answer beyond saying that it would be a better place for me than Brooklyn, and that no real harm would be likely to come to me there."

"I saw that she was determined to do her duty so far as she had promised, and she continued to be morose and uncommunicative, notwithstanding that she had not often held out against my loving and coaxing ways before."

"At least, tell me what she meant by *It* when she was whispering with you," I cried, at last. "And what could you have meant by saying that this place is haunted?"

"She looked at me keenly, and then broke into a forced laugh. 'Don't be such a goose as Sylvia herself,' said she, impatiently. 'She imagines she has seen a spook, or something of the sort. Go to bed now, like a good girl, and try to rest yourself.'"

The detective was rubbing his hands together in that softly satisfied way of his, as Maggy came to a brief pause in her story.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MAGGY FINISHES HER TALE.

"Why do you do that?" demanded the young girl, regarding him with a smile.

"Because," was the detective's complacent reply, "it is all coming out nicely and clearly, piece by piece."

"What is coming out?"

"The mystery, my dear—the mystery of the apparition. But you'll be able to follow me presently, when you shall have finished your story."

"I have but little more to tell," said Maggy, proceeding. "It must have been two or three hours after midnight when Jane awoke me from a fitful sleep, saying that I must get up and dress, as madam had returned."

"Jane also made a small bundle of some of my spare clothes. Then madam came in and said that I must promise not to make any outcry during the drive that was before me, or she would be obliged to have me bound and gagged before making the start."

"As there was only that alternative, I gave her the required promise, which she knew perfectly well she could trust me to keep."

"I wanted to say some parting words in con-

fidence to Jane, but was not given the chance. Madam was still dressed as she had come in from the street. She seemed preoccupied, and exhibited no emotion at separating from me, notwithstanding that I had never before been absent from her side, so to speak, for a whole day and night, to the best of my recollection.

"Jane, however, appeared troubled and anxious about me, though she would give me no other sign than a parting hand-pressure. However, at the gate, when her brother was offering to assist me into the coach, against my scornful disinclination to be assisted, she gave him a furious look, and I heard her say something in their Gypsy dialect which caused him to turn away his head and appear out of sorts.

"We started through the lonely and dark street for the ferry. As I told you, I had two companions besides Jem—a man and a woman. The former I did not recognize at first, but soon discovered to be Mr. Farnham, he having been one of madam's visitors for a good while back, though always careful not to meet either Mr. Thompson or Mr. Cooper when making his calls.

"However, I had never liked or trusted him, and was not sorry that he should seem wholly indifferent to my presence. Jem was equally obliging in that particular for the greater part of the drive; and was also good enough to hold his peace rather good-naturedly when I discouraged, as I did in short order, two or three of his attempts to say something soft and pleasant to me.

"The woman, as I said, was a perfect stranger to me. Though she was not unattractive in a general way, I instinctively disliked and mistrusted her from the moment I set eyes on her face, by the rather uncertain light of the coach-lamps.

"However, the woman said not a word to me during the drive, though for that matter, she made me uncomfortable enough, for neither did she once take her eyes off my face while it lasted, and there was something brooding and resentful in them that I could not then understand.

"When we reached the house in which you found me, it was all dark and cheerless. But the woman bestirred herself handily, and soon had ready something nice and warm for us to eat.

"Anxious and worn out as I was, I was still very hungry, and did not disdain to share the repast with some heartiness.

"After that, it being then in the gray of the morning, I must have shown that I was dispirited and faint-feeling. At all events, Jem Gorgio said:

"Miss Knight, you are looking tired. My foster-sister, Madge Harker, here, will show you to your room, if you choose."

"Neither he nor Farnham had offered to make us acquainted before.

"As he spoke those words, the woman's face flushed and her eyes glowed, notwithstanding that his seemingly careless speech had been accompanied by a sort of brutal warning in his glance at her, all of which I was totally at a loss to comprehend.

"She made no reply, however, but submissively took up a light, and showed me to a cosy room on the next floor above the basement.

"No sooner were we alone together, with the door closed behind us, than her mood changed in a flash.

"She wheeled upon me, with a face distorted with hatred.

"Do you know what I would do for you if I dared—you with your youthful face and fine eyes?" she hissed at me, with a convulsed bosom. "I would murder you, I would kill you piecemeal, where you stand!"

"For a moment I was astounded. Then the hideous truth rushed upon me like a revelation. This woman and this Gypsy-man—Oh, my friend! but you will understand.

"Instantly my dislike was turned to pity and sympathy.

"Stay, Miss Harker, stay!" I exclaimed, springing after her as she was rushing out of the room. "You cannot think, you cannot suppose—?"

"But the door was shut and locked on the outside in my face.

"She never gave me another chance to say what I wanted to, to relieve myself of the hateful odium that I felt she must feel for me in her forsaken, desolate heart.

"Perhaps she was not worth such a self-humiliation on my innocent part. But, be that as it might, there was no rest or sleep for me after that. I was too much occupied with my shame and my indignation to think of aught else."

She buried her face in her hands.

"My wronged, my suffering, darling!" said the detective, taking her in his arms. "It was an experience of the world's wickedness that may well have appalled you."

And he uttered many other tender, soothing words.

"My story is about ended," said Maggy, at last, with forced composure. "When you came to my rescue I had suffered no further indig-

nity, and had made the acquaintance of few other persons in the house. Even the woman, who told you at the gate that she was Mr. Farnham's wife, I had only caught a mere glimpse of before."

"Did you gain the impression," asked the detective, after a pause, "that the house was a regular rendezvous for the Gang?"

"Yes; at the breakfast, which we had late in the morning, I judged from certain unguarded words that both Mr. Thompson and Mr. Cooper are familiars there. Then I got a glimpse into the cellar, where I saw a sort of furnace and work-bench, together with a lot of shining metal plates, and received any number of black looks from both Gorgio and the woman for my pains."

Clew slapped his thigh.

"Ha! coining and engraving, too!" he exclaimed. "A new find for me!"

"I am glad of that, my dearest," said Maggy, sweetly. "But don't forget that you have a story, in return for mine."

Thus reminded, Clew lost no time in giving her a running account of his adventures.

Maggy was appalled to feel assured that Mrs. Knight was nothing less than a sort of high priestess in the councils of the terrible Black Stars, and was hardly less frightened to learn of the narrow escapes encountered by her brave rescuer.

But she was more purely astonished at the changed fortunes of her pretended father, Knight, and was still more puzzled over what had been seen of Sylvia's encounter with the apparition than anything else.

"And I am to understand," Maggy exclaimed, "that the decent-looking man with the long side-whiskers, at this moment beside the driver of this coach, is my—is the Algernon Knight who came in tatters to beg an interview with me on that night of my first meeting with you?"

"The same; but he is no longer Algernon Knight. He is my London friend, Mr. Gernon."

"I understand; and yet it scarcely seems real. Do you think he will prove worthy of your confidence?"

"I can only hope so—yes, and I believe so, too. But time can only prove that."

"I hope so, too. Now, again, as to the apparition; it is really astounding that madam should likewise be frightened by its visit."

"You can't be more astonished at that than I was. Before that, I had supposed her at the bottom of the trick, beyond question."

"You are sure that it was the same apparition you had seen elsewhere?"

"I should say so—the image of Mr. Lestranger's murdered brother as he might have appeared in life, only with ghostly suggestions."

"And you feel confident of its being a deception?"

"Of course; don't you?"

"Perhaps so. But now who can be the trickster—equally interested in terrifying not only Mr. Lestranger's household, but Sylvia herself?"

"A person whose work upon the latter's nerves came only as an after-thought."

"What person?"

"Is no one suggested to your own mind as filling the conditions?"

"Yes; you remember that once before I suggested Jane Gorgio as the possible trickster."

"And I couldn't agree with you then; but now I do."

"Strange! for my part, I was beginning to think myself mistaken as to that. You think it possible, then?"

"More than that—even probable—very probable. Turn over everything in your mind, as I have since done, and see if you can arrive at any other conclusion. But here we are at last."

It was early in the afternoon when the pretended Quakeress, with the strangest of sensations, alighted at the homestead gate, with the assistance of the pseudo private secretary of Mr. Dennett.

CHAPTER XXIX.

SELF-PROTECTED MR. DENNETT.

CLEW had taken the precaution of notifying Mr. Lestranger, by messenger, beforehand of the liberty he was taking in determining to place Maggy under his secret protection.

Now, notwithstanding that he had been uncertain as to what spirit the rich old bachelor would accept the proposition, he was somewhat surprised to find only Mrs. Masters, the old housekeeper, in attendance to proffer the hospitalities of the mansion.

Still, the old lady's manner was agreeable enough as she received the new-comers in one of the parlors.

"The maister regrets his inability to bid ye good ken wi' the young leddy, Maister Clew," said she, with only a surprised look at the detective's antiquated-seeming companion. "But there's to be nae but good greeting for her when she cooms."

"I am glad of that, Mrs. Masters, though I would sooner have received your master's welcome in his own person," said Clew, not a little disappointed. "The young lady is wearied

out; if you should show her to her room, I think she would thank you for it."

"To be sure, sur, an' muckle joy. But where is the young leddy?"

Maggy here came to the rescue by whipping off her Quaker bonnet, and shaking down the dusky ringlets to her shoulders.

The old Scotch dame, who had been given a hint as to the manner of guest expected, uttered an exclamation of delight at the vision of dark loveliness that had burst upon her so unexpected.

"The bonny child, the pair darling!" she exclaimed, hastening to make amends for her seeming surliness with both hands extended. "Come wi' me, come wi' me to the good little room I ha' in raidiness for ye."

And she forthwith bore the young girl away.

Clew did not wait to ascertain the whereabouts of Mr. Lestranger, but rejoined his new follower, who had remained in waiting at the gate, after dismissing the coach.

"You are sure that our arrival was not particularly noticed by any outsider?" he queried, a little anxiously.

"I am sure of it, sir. There has not been a passenger along the street since you alighted; the Pig and Whistle front across the way hasn't given a sign; and there hasn't been a soul on the lookout from the house and grounds next door."

"That is well. True, our d'sguises were complete, but there is nothing like being doubly sure. Come with me."

They proceeded up the street as far as Mr. Dennett's gate, where the detective found Feeny on the lookout as he had anticipated.

He introduced the two men to each other, with some words for Feeny's elucidation, and then inquired how matters seemed to be with Mr. Dennett.

The professional spotter shook his head with an air of unmitigated disgust.

"Sure, an' I'm as ignorant as yourself, your Honor," said he. "The owld mustard-pot wouldn't be afther lettin' me have wur-rd wid him, nor wid his man, Jerry, aither—an' the divil Jerry bein' a fellow-townsmen of mine on the owld sod, to boot—bad 'cess to the pair of them!"

"This is very strange. Did you not offer him proof that you came from me?"

"Divil a proof, sor."

"Why not, you rascal?"

"He wouldn't let me witan a gun-shot, your Honor. He's made a foortification of the hoose, wid a cannon or bluntherbuss at ivery windy."

Clew reflected a moment, and then burst into a hearty laugh.

"This is too ridiculous," he exclaimed. "Wait here, the pair of you, for my return."

As he approached the house, in the center of its vast old gardens, and overlooking the waters of the river and harbor, he had to give vent to his laughter afresh.

Feeny had not greatly exaggerated the situation.

All the lower windows were close-shuttered, and from between the bowed shutters of most of the upper ones peeped either a blunderbuss, a horse-pistol, a boarding-cutlass, or some other equally antiquated or infrequent sort of weapon.

It looked like a farmer-tenant's house of the middle-ages, expectant of a brigand raid.

"Hallo!" cried Clew.

The summons had to be repeated several times, but at last an enormous horse-pistol in a trembling hand made its appearance at one of the semi-shuttered upper windows. This was followed by the bell-shaped muzzle of a blunderbuss with another trembling hand behind it. And at last, over and between the two, peered out the night-capped head of the land-poor Croesus himself.

"Hallo!" he squeakingly responded. "Stand off, you ruffians! we're armed to the teeth—we'll die before we're murdered—we'll— But, hallo! is that really you, Mr.—Mr. Luxmore?"

"Why, yes!" was the laughing reply. "But then if you're bound to die before you're murdered, perhaps I had better postpone my respects."

"Humph! ha! I didn't exactly mean those words, Mr.—Mr. Luxmore. But then, you're otherwise right. Yes, that's it. You'd better postpone paying your respects."

"Why, what do you mean, sir?"

"Just what I mean, young man."

"But can't you grant me a brief interview? I want to confer with you."

"Not to be interviewed; conferences, save at long range strictly interdicted."

"But this is too absurd!"

"Is it? Well, you say so."

"But I wish to report to you."

"What about? Are those Black Stars wholly killed off, wounded or captured, as yet?"

"Well, not exactly as yet."

"Train off, then! We're armed to the teeth, besides being provisioned for a siege of indefinite duration. Communication with the outside world is interdicted as long as a murdering Black Star remains alive or unshackled. In the mean time, we shall defend ourselves to the death, sir—mark me, to the death!"

"That's the prate, be gob!" cried another voice, with a brogue in it. "Och, an' it's thrue for yez, too, that we're purvisioned up to the handie."

And then, similarly armed, slowly out of an adjoining window was thrust the head of Jerry McManus, similarly night-capped, and with only this distinctive difference as between master and man, that the nose of a black bottle protruded from the bosom of his old-country red waistcoat, while bleary content dwelt in his face and eyes.

The detective laughed yet more heartily, and yet with something of impatience in his merriment.

"I wish to see you, sir," he reiterated to Mr. Dennett.

"I'm on sight, young man. Look away!"

"You know what I mean. I wish to converse with you in private."

"Can't be done; you've been told that before."

"Have you sent the safeguard notices to the newspapers, as I advised?"

"No, and don't intend to; my present situation is secure enough for me."

"Indeed! then you had best remain in it. But does it not occur to you that you are acting a good deal like an ass?"

"Sir, sir!" and both blunderbuss and horse-pistol wagged aloft suggestively. "Must I regard this strange persistence as additional grounds for certain grave suspicions that have crept into my mind?"

Jerry here relinquished one of his pieces of artillery to take a long pull at his bosom companion, which he thereupon waved over his head with a Tipperary whoop.

"Sure, an' that's the talk to give the omadhoun, me masther!" he bellowed. "We're ar-rumed to the tayth, an' glory to Saint Patrick! our perwisions is in good bottles."

"What do you mean, sir?" demanded Clew, addressing himself peremptorily to Dennett.

"What new suspicions are you referring to?"

"Ahem! to the possibility, young man—mind you, I only say the possibility—of your being one of the Black Stars yourself."

The detective turned on his heel, without another word, and left the holders of the improvised fort to their pig-headedness.

After dismissing Gernon to rejoin Danny in the watch upon the Black Star rendezvous in Greenwich, and ordering Feeny to remain on his present round of observation, he slipped back into the Lestrangle homestead house.

Maggie was resting in her room, Mrs. Masters said, and Mr. Lestrangle was still absent, having gone out to drive.

So Clew, after availing himself of the library cabinet, to effect a transformation back into the character of Bunchy Fives, boldly made his appearance on Sylvia's piazza, and knocked at the door.

CHAPTER XXX.

DETECTIVE AND GRASS WIDOW.

THE door was opened by the reputable old woman, who did duty as day-servant, and was on the point of going home.

"I wish to see Mrs. Knight, if you please," said the pretended Bunchy.

The woman eyed him with disfavor. Her only son had gone to the bad through engine-house associations and suggestions of the fire-boy form of rowdiness were as poison in her sight. Moreover, she was beginning to have her suspicions as to the character of the "widow" herself, and, being a pious, conscientious woman, was not in the best of tempers accordingly.

"Not in," she replied, shortly. "Gone out to drive."

"You're mistaken, ma'am," said the detective, with a flourish of his plug hat and a swipe at his soap-locks. "I saw her drive back twenty minutes ago."

Which was no more than the truth.

"Then I didn't know it, for I was in the kitchen," which was equally true. "Like enough she's too tired to be seen."

"I really must see her."

"Find a way, then."

And the old woman was actually crowding him out, preparatory to shutting the door in her own face no less than his, when Jane Gorgio put in an appearance at the rear of the hall.

Jane had seen the Bowery character before, and might have also possessed some surreptitious information as to his Black Star aspirations.

"What is wanted?" she asked, stepping forward, while the day-woman angrily took herself off down the gate-path.

"Bunchy" repeated his request to be permitted to see Mrs. Knight.

"My mistress is out of sorts after her drive," said Jane, eying him with a peculiar expression. "But I will take her your request, young man. What name?"

"Fives—Mr. Fives—perhaps you'd better say Mr. Bunchy Fives. That will be a little more explicit."

"I should say so. Well, Mr. Bunchy Fives, just you wait right where you are till I come back with your answer."

The visitor grinned oglingly, and Jane retired, with another peculiar look that he didn't exactly like.

She presently returned, saying that her mistress would receive him as a special privilege, though she could not imagine who he was.

"Bunchy," a moment later, found himself in the back parlor, confronting the mistress of the house, who was reclining languidly on a luxurious lounge, and received him with a slight nod, after glancing at his fire-boots and soap-locks rather discouragingly.

"Take a seat and excuse my rising, Mr. Fives, as I believe you call yourself," said she. "I am indisposed."

"So I see, ma'am," and the visitor dropped independently into an easy-chair in close proximity with the reclining form. "Anything serious?"

"No. Who are you?"

"Bunchy Fives, at your service, ma'am."

"Indeed!"

"Foreman of the Bloody Sixth fire-truck, Bowery swell-at-large, and—"

He paused with an eagle-like leer.

"This is decidedly interesting, if not absolutely refining, sir. Well, and—what?"

"The latest initiated into the Black Star Brotherhood—that is, to a certain extent."

"You are pleased to talk in enigmas, young sir. I don't know you. What are you talking about? I thought you might have business with me, or you should not have been admitted here. Oblige me by taking your departure."

But "Bunchy" only leered again, crossed his booted legs, and patted his soap-locks.

"I am here on business, ma'am," said he, suavely. "Fact is, that's just what's the matter with me."

"What business?"

"Fresh information for the Brotherhood."

"This is growing tedious."

"My information concerns old man Dennett. It is very important to the Black Star Brotherhood."

There was a slight show of interest at the mention of Dennett's name, but that was all.

"What do you take me for, Mr. Fives?"

"The Queen or High Priestess of the gang; and you were present, though masked, at my initiation."

She shrugged her shoulders—very shapely shoulders they were, by the way—and touched a silver bell on a small table at her side.

The folding-doors dividing the room from the front parlor slid back, and two men stepped into view.

They were One-Eyed Thompson and Bristol Bill, both of whom were well acquainted with the Bowery rounder whom the detective was personating.

"You are evidently not much of a success with the ladies, Bunchy," said Bill, nodding good-naturedly. "Thompson and I have chanced to overh-ar you."

"Yes," said Thompson. "Who and what are these Black Stars you were raving about, Bunchy?"

"Bunchy" laughed, uncrossed his legs, and reached for his hat, which, with some originality, he had brought into the lady's presence, and set on the carpet at his side.

"Of course I've made a mistake," said he, "and I axes the lady's pardon. Since we're so innocent of Black Star connections in this quarter, perhaps I had better reserve my pointers for duty to-morrow night."

"Hold on," said Cooper. "Don't be in a hurry, Bunchy."

"No, no," observed Thompson. "We wouldn't appear as driving you away, Bunchy."

"I trust," supplemented Mrs. Knight, very sweetly, "that my inability to understand the gentleman's allusions will not be construed into an offense."

"Bunchy" set down his hat again, smoothed his soap-locks, and grinned.

"Still," said he, "perhaps I'd better wait till I can speak right out in meetin', as they say Down East."

"Oh, you can merely suppose us to belong to any brotherhood you please, for that matter," said Thompson.

"And to have an interest in Mr. Dennett, too," remarked the "widow," smiling encouragingly. "You see, he is a sort of neighbor of mine, up the hill."

"That's it," observed Thompson. "And we may also tacitly acknowledge that certain tests have been nobly met—specially with reference to a party by the name of Sutton."

"Look here, all of you," said "Bunchy," repressing a yawn, "this beating about the bush is wearing on my constitution, which is naturally a delicate one, you see. Masks or no masks, let us talk like Black Stars together, or I reserve my pointers till to-morrow night."

"Well, then, talk away," said Cooper, and he coolly seated himself.

Thompson did likewise, completing the semi-circle before the reclining lady, and they nodded together.

"Good enough!" assented the visitor, "though I can't see why you've held off so long as you have."

"Masks are masks till there's the order for

the unmasking, my boy," observed Bristol Bill. "How did you manage it so cleverly with Sutton?"

"He's dead, and on time, ain't he?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Well, that was my lookout. If the coroner calls it heart-disease, that's the coroner's lookout."

They all looked at him approvingly, not to say admiringly.

"Now about Dennett?" said Thompson, inquiringly.

"Well, he's somehow taken the alarm and fastened himself up in his house as in a fort, for fear of the Black Stars."

The trio looked grave.

"What could have given him the alarm?" demanded Thompson, knitting his brows.

"That's what puzzles me, and, in fact brings me here. Even in my character as Luxmore, his private secretary, the old jackass won't have me within gun-shot of his premises—or will only talk with me at long range. In the same character I have been making inquiries at the Lestrangle homestead, but no one knows what has got into old man Dennett."

"Both Bat and Goebeling found him as suspicious as rabbit," suggested Cooper.

"Oh, I was present when he received their visit, as perhaps you know."

"Has Captain Clew been in communication with Dennett, think you?"

"He must have been, though even Clew could have no inkling of our plans."

"I'm not so certain of that," said Thompson. "The detective is a lynx, and some one must have conveyed the warning. But do you bring any suggestion with you, Bunchy?"

"Yes; a pointer, without a suggestion isn't of much account."

"What do you suggest?"

"To do for the old man without delay—to-night, for instance."

They shook their heads, though apparently approving his zeal.

"It wouldn't do," said Cooper.

"Not by any means," assisted Thompson. "The conclave must order it first, after full consideration."

"But why not now?" urged Bunchy. "The papers can be made out afterward."

"No, they can't. The bonds must receive registry before the signer's death, though unknown to him, and only Dredger and Fake can put them through properly. Not to be thought of."

"Bunchy" arose with a decidedly crestfallen air.

"I've only put my foot in it, it seems," said he, brusquely. "But who'd have looked for all this blasted red tape? I'm no account, I suppose."

"Yes, you are," said Cooper, warmly. "You've proved your sincerity finely. Wait till the unmasking."

"That's it," interposed Thompson. "You're not to be downcast, Bunchy. You'll do."

"Of course, this has all been so much Greek to me," said madam, reaching for the silver bell again. "But I hope the gentleman will not go without taking a glass of wine."

But "Bunchy" blandly excused himself, on the gentlemanly grounds that he was already so well primed with Jamaica rum as not to venture upon a mixture, and took his departure accordingly.

While somewhat surprised at the wariness of madam and her friends to openly admit their connection with the Black Stars, even to an initiated new member, he had succeeded in impressing them with the idea of his superlative zeal in the Brotherhood's murderous designs, which had been the principal, if not the only, object of his visit.

CHAPTER XXXI.

JANE GORGIO.

TWILIGHT was falling as he quitted the grass widow's, and, after making sure that the coast was clear, stole around to the rear, with the intention of making a brief tour of observation on his way back to the homestead.

But, circumspect as had been his movements, a light hand was laid on his shoulder.

He turned to find himself confronted by Jane Gorgio, who was regarding him with a peculiar smile.

"A few words with you, young man," said she, softly.

"As many as you please, my beauty."

"I heard everything that passed in that back parlor, young man."

"The deuce you did?"

"Yes; and I'm filled with surprise."

"At what, my dear?"

"At the blindness of my mistress and her friends. But then maybe my eyes are sharper than other's."

"Oho!" and the disguised man began to feel uncomfortable. "But what were they so blind about?"

"In not seeing through you, young man."

"See here, my beauty, you're not complimentary."

"I'm not meaning to be, Captain Clew."

"You must be crazy!"

"Not at all, young man. But if I've seen through your disguises, it's no reason that others have."

The detective reflected.

"Nor is there any reason for your not communicating your penetration to those others," said he, at length.

"I wouldn't do it, young man; your secret is perfectly safe with me—I'll even stand by you well—on one condition."

"Conditions with me, eh? Well, what's yours?"

"That you tell me what has become of my young lady."

"Ha!"

"Oh!" she exclaimed, with unwonted emotion; "you don't know how I idolize that child. Tell me, tell me what you have done with her."

"Wait a bit, Jane. Is her escape from the Greenwich den generally known, then?"

"Known? Why, madam is wild over it, and so are all the rest. They could scarcely conceal their anxiety on that score even while talking with you."

"So! What especial harm can the girl do them?"

"She can hang them—or, at least, some of them!"

"I infer, then, that Maggy is really a somnambulist, and must have witnessed the murder of Mr. Louis Lestrangle in the sleep-walking state?"

"Yes, yes! But you are her lover; she must have told you this much."

"She has merely admitted the habit, but is ignorant of anything else."

"Oh, it will all come to her, sooner or later! I know it, madam knows it, they all know it. That is what they fear."

"When it does come back to her, it will be made use of."

"Of course, and I hope so."

"You hope so?"

"I do, indeed, Captain Clew! Bad as I may have been, I have never been an accessory to the crimes of Sylvia and her associates. Besides, somehow I am a changed woman."

"I hope that may be true."

"Oh, you may trust me. Did I not bring Maggy to you once?"

"Yes, you did that."

"But you are not telling me what you have done with her."

"I don't know as I intend to. She is safe."

"Of course, I know that much."

"But why would you know more?"

"Because I love her—because I am filled with suspense and anxiety, sir."

"She is in good hands; let that content you."

"But it doesn't content me. Oh, sir, will you not trust me?"

"Not yet."

"I am sure you may."

"That is to be proved. Confidence should be paid for with confidence."

"I will do all I can."

"Maggy is surely not the real daughter of Mrs. Knight?"

"It stands to reason that she is not."

"What is her origin?"

"I honestly do not know. It is the one womanly secret that Sylvia has always steadfastly refused to share with me."

"Will you do what you can to clear up the mystery, when opportunity shall be given you?"

"I will—on my honor."

"It is you who have enacted the rôle of the apparition."

Jane Gorgio started, and bit her lip.

Then she returned the detective's searching gaze honestly.

"It is the truth," she answered.

"I'm not holding you to task for it," said the detective. "It was a clever ruse. But you must satisfy my curiosity on several points."

"Speak."

"What incited you first to adopt the masquerade?"

"To empty the Lestrangle mansion."

"To what end? But, I see—in the interest of your mistress and her crew, of course."

"No, no; by Heaven, no!"

"To what purpose, then?"

A blush deepened in the young woman's dark and comely face.

"Because I had come to love John Thomas," she replied. "After emptying the homestead, I intended to confess all to John, and get him to obtain the privilege of looking after the house. By that means I would be enabled to see him oftener and with less restraint."

The confession seemed to come at considerable cost to her womanliness, but the detective was still not satisfied.

"I wouldn't question any woman's sacred feelings," said he. "But, Jane, you have seen a good deal of life, and you have known honest John Thomas but a very short time."

"I understand your drift, Captain Clew. But I speak the truth when I say that no man ever honestly made love to me before John Thomas did, and I—well I hope to be his wife some time."

She was blushing again, and this time painfully.

"No more on that, Jane, and I'm sorry if I have hurt your sensibilities."

"Oh, it doesn't matter, sir!"

"But why should you also have frightened your mistress by your ghostly impersonation?"

"What! you know of that, too?"

"Yes; I viewed her terror through the parlor window."

"Well, can't you guess my object?"

"No."

"You are duller than I thought—but then I must not forget that you are no believer in my sincerity."

"What was your object?"

"Merely to hold my mistress down-stairs, while my young lady, whom I had already notified, could have time to quit the strong room and slip out to you, in accordance with my promise."

"Jane, you are a trump! and I'm ashamed of my continued mistrust of you. One more explanation and my curiosity will be satisfied."

"You've only to command, sir."

"Your resemblance to the dead man—how did you manage it?"

"I had observed the poor gentleman, when he was alive and suspicious of danger, much oftener than he was probably aware of, and had thus become familiar with his dress and bearing."

"But—"

"Let me go on, please. Then I am an actress by nature. A few days after my making the acquaintance of John Thomas, and consequently after the murder, I saw in a sloop-shop a cast-off suit for sale that I recognized as having belonged to the gentleman. This first suggested the impersonation to me. I purchased the suit. The wig, facial make-up and all the rest were my own contrivance. Fortunately, I had two wigs, or the one of which you deprived me would have rendered my subsequent masqueradings out of the question."

"Jane Gorgio, you are an uncommonly clever woman!"

"Of course, I am; but is that all you have to say?"

"No; you have won my confidence. I am going to trust you."

"Oh, sir!" and Jane clasped her hands expectantly.

"Your young lady is at present—"

"Where, sir? Oh, where?"

"In the adjoining house, under the protection of Mr. Lestrangle's housekeeper."

"Well, now, sir, you are clever, too!" she said. "You've brought her right back under madam's nose, so to speak, and yet no concealment could be more admirable."

"I flatter myself it was a good move," said the detective. "Of course I can now trust you to keep Maggy's secret."

"With my life! But, wait!"

She had started, laying her hand on his arm in the heavy dusk. Then she drew him into a convenient clump.

"An eavesdropper!" she whispered. "And he must be taken care of, or my young lady is lost."

He made a movement of assent, and they both waited.

Presently a crouching, powerful figure was perceived in the endeavor to steal away unobserved.

The Fighting Detective silently put his companion to one side.

Then he suddenly bounded upon the intruder, and encompassed him in a throttling clutch.

CHAPTER XXXII.

EAVESDROPPING JEM.

THERE was a brief struggle, but Clew had also let out with his right at the instant of his tackling onset, which was tantamount to a speedy triumph.

Then, in a moment more, he had the eavesdropper speechless and handcuffed.

"Why, it is your own brother—it's Jem Gorgio!" he said, turning the man's face up to such light as was still afforded.

Jane knitted her brows, and it was with small sisterly sympathy that she looked down upon the conquered man.

"It is true," she admitted. "He must have tracked you thither. The secret of your disguise, no less than that of my young lady's hiding-place, is now in his possession."

"And of your adhesion to my interests," added the detective.

The captive made a fierce movement, that was a sufficient admission of what had been said.

"No need to say that as a reminder for me, sir," said Jane, calmly. "Were this dangerous scoundrel twenty times my brother, I would remain none the less staunch to my young lady and you."

"True; and he must be effectually silenced. Fidelity now will be the touchstone of our faith, Jane."

"I accept it as such. Take the man away with you. I doubt not but that you can secure safe-keeping for him in Mr. Lestrangle's house. I would go with you, but that my mistress may require my attendance at any moment."

"That is well. In the mean time, I trust to your discretion. Tarry no longer. It isn't safe."

But Jane, nevertheless, turned for a last look, after starting for the house.

"Get up!" said the detective; and, as the Gypsy man got unwillingly upon his feet the muzzle of a pistol was clapped to his ear. "Forward, march!"

The order was obeyed, and, as the young woman marked captor and captive disappear in the gloom, she clasped her hands wildly.

"What has come over me?" she murmured. "What would I have said, three weeks ago, if this had been predicted—that I would resign my own scoundrel of a brother into a detective's righteous clutches, and all for that girl? Oh! what has come over me?"

As she was about stepping into the house, a familiar signal smote her ear from a different quarter of the grounds.

She caught her breath, the eloquent blood springing into her dark cheeks, and the next instant she was speeding down a certain path.

Then she knew what had come over her, for she was in her lover's arms.

Mr. Lestrangle had returned from his drive long ere this, and probably no easy-going gentleman was ever more surprised than he when the detective presented himself and his prisoner in one of the rear entrances of the old homestead house.

Explanations were soon made.

"Fortunately, there is provision for just such safe-keeping as this rascal seems to require," said Mr. Lestrangle. "Bring him along."

His astonished housekeeper carried a light while he led the way to a dungeon-like apartment, strong, but dry and wholesome, in the cellar, which had done the State some service back in Colonial days, when a Huguenot ancestor of his, the first of the homestead's occupants, was a magistrate in high standing with the powers that were.

"This will answer, I trust," said Mr. Lestrangle, when Mrs. Masters had lighted an iron lamp that hung from the ceiling of the cell.

"Couldn't be better," replied the detective, cheerfully; and he relieved the prisoner of both gag and shackles. "There, my man; make yourself at home."

Jem glared sullenly, and, without a word, threw himself upon the pallet, with which the place was provided.

But, as he was being left to himself, he became a little more communicative.

"I say," he growled, "how long am I to be left here?"

The detective turned with a smile.

"Till you can be welcomed by your brethren of the Black Star in prison or on the scaffold," he replied. "But don't be impatient, I beg of you. You'll be taken good care of while you are here."

The caged ruffian sunk back with a muttered oath, and the heavy door of the strong room closed with a bang.

"Where are you going?" asked Mr. Lestrangle of the detective a few minutes later.

They were in the library, and the latter had just resumed his natural character in the adjoining cabinet.

"To the Pig and Whistle for a bite," replied Clew, pleasantly. "Haven't broken my fast since morning."

Mr. Lestrangle flushed painfully.

"What's the objection to your dining with me?" he asked. "I shouldn't think you would require an invitation."

"Perhaps not. But the unwelcome guest I've already brought you might be all the inconvenience you could submit to in one day."

Mr. Lestrangle grew redder yet.

"You refer to the young lady?"

"Certainly."

Mr. Lestrangle held out his hand.

"Forgive me," he said. "I own that I was somewhat put out at first—don't forget that I'm an old bachelor, with some of the crustiness proverbial to that condition."

Clew accepted the proffered hand, and sat down.

"You might at least have waited for my explanation in full," said he, gently.

"So I might, and I am devilish sorry I didn't. Let me have the explanation now, I beg of you!"

The detective gave an account of his more recent adventures.

"What!" exclaimed Mr. Lestrangle; "why, of course there was nothing for you to do but to bring the young lady here."

"I knew you would say so at last."

"And this, then, is the explanation, too? Well, well; I've only to say that Jane Gorgio must be a very extraordinary young woman."

"You'll be yet surer of that if you chance to meet her."

"Now, as to the young lady you brought here, Clew. Mrs. Masters is already in love with her, it seems, and can be trusted to make her comfortable and keep her secret inviolate."

"You haven't seen her yourself, then?"

"No; and that is just it. I don't want to see her. Good Lord! that a relative of that infernal adventuress, Sylvia Knight, should be accorded

my tacit hospitality and protection ought to be enough, I should think."

"Undoubtedly, if she were Sylvia's relative, which she isn't."

"Oh, but you only surmise so."

"It is more than surmise; I'd be willing to swear to it, after what has passed. And so would Miss Maggy herself, for that matter."

"But if not Sylvia's, whose daughter is she?"

"I don't know."

"Ah, there you are! And neither does the girl herself know, most likely."

"You're right. She is no wiser, unfortunately, than I."

"And the adventuress, doubtless, will admit nothing in the support of your theory?"

"She will admit nothing."

"How about Knight himself, whom you seem to have taken so strangely into your employ?"

"Neither will he—at present."

"Ah! as I said before—there you are!"

"By the way," said Clew, after a long pause, "have you preserved a picture of your unfortunate sister, Mr. Lestrangle?"

"Yes," replied the other, with a surprised look.

"Would you kindly permit me to see it?"

"There can be no objection," Mr. Lestrangle returned, though not without hesitation.

He went to the bookcase, opened a drawer, and returned with a morocco case.

"It represents poor Marguerite at eighteen, before a cloud had come upon her life," said he, handing over the case.

The detective reverently opened it, and then with difficulty mastered a start of supreme astonishment.

"I don't marvel at your emotion," said Mr. Lestrangle, interpreting the picture's effect in his own way. "Marguerite was more beautiful than a dream—few can gaze even upon her pictured countenance unmoved."

After a lingering examination, the detective closed the case with a sort of sigh, and Mr. Lestrangle returned it to the drawer.

"Was the original so dazzlingly fair of complexion as is made to appear in the miniature?" asked Clew.

"Even more so. Why do you ask?"

"For no other reason than because of its transcendent loveliness. Shall you not have the young lady—your strange guest—dine with us?"

Mr. Lestrangle's face fell.

"I wasn't going to," he stammered. "Besides, secrecy is her main object, and the dining-room windows—"

"I will attend to them."

So it was arranged, and ten minutes later both men stood at table in the dining-room, whose windows were closely shuttered without and curtained within, awaiting the presence of the young girl.

She presently followed the housekeeper into the room, looking meek but composed in the quaint Quakeress costume (barring the bonnet, of course) in which she had reached the house a few hours previous.

Nevertheless, she presented a vision of superlative loveliness.

Mr. Lestrangle started forward with an exclamation, and then remained rooted to the spot.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A PARDONABLE DECEPTION.

He checked himself with an effort, however, muttering, "No, no; as well compare Night with Day—darkness with sunshine!" and then welcomed the young girl with his most courteous manner.

It was observed that the master of the homestead did not again pay his guest any marked attention during the progress of the repast.

Later, however, he was pacing the library floor with a restless step, awaiting the reappearance of the detective, who had lingered to make Maggy some confidences as to what had chanced since his last separation from her.

"Well?" Mr. Lestrangle burst out, immediately upon Clew's rejoining him.

"What is the matter, sir?" inquired the latter, elevating his brows. "You have seen your protégée, if I may call her such?"

"Of course you may!"

"Then you were not disappointed in her appearance?"

"Disappointed? no, startled, stunned! Good God! it's simply miraculous."

"What is it?"

"Her resemblance, and yet her dissimilarity, to Marguerite—the Marguerite so long dead and gone! You must have remarked it, too."

"I did—by the miniature you were kind enough to show me."

"Of course. Heavens! but for the difference of complexion, I could have sworn it was Marguerite's self stepped back out of the tomb."

"True."

"But the girl is dark as a Gypsy—face, hands, wrists—dark as a Basque Spaniard, for all the wonderful transparency of her skin. It is as if an angel of dazzling fairness had suddenly been invested with the mantle of night's mystery and loveliness."

"True."

"Why do you keep echoing me? You are not often thus, Clew. Why can't you help me out?"

Clew laughed.

"You are not often thus either, my friend," said he. "What is there to help you out of? This enigma?"

"Yes."

"But it is as much of an enigma for me as for you. But let us see. Might this young girl be your sister's child?"

"Incredible! There is the complexion, which would seem impossible to have been born of my sister's fairness."

"It was Sylvia's brother, I believe, who ran off with your sister and finally deserted her?"

"Of course it was."

"Was he dark or fair?"

"Very fair—indeed, quite as exceptionally so for a man as Marguerite was for a woman."

"Ah!"

"So you see it would have been impossible. But what am I raving of? Don't I remember the child herself? Wasn't she the apple of our eye before she was stolen?"

"Ah! and she was fair, too."

"Fair as her mother, if such a thing could be. A little fairy of roses and lilies in her complexion."

"Too bad!"

"Oh, of course! Dash every hope as soon as formed! That's right!"

"What hope are you talking about?"

"I don't know."

"My dear sir, doesn't it occur to you that you are a little off?"

Mr. Lestrangle stared, laughed nervously and then sat down.

"I suppose so," said he. "Come, I really must try to compose myself."

"That is right. Dismiss the young girl completely from your thoughts."

"I shall do so—resolutely. By the way, what have you been saying to her?"

"You are foregoing the subject with a vengeance. Well, I have been telling her about Jane and my prisoner."

"Oh!"

"Come, now. I want your opinion about the ridiculous manner in which Mr. Dennett is carrying on."

"He is simply a fool!"

"Agreed. But shouldn't something be done to get him away from the old house?"

"What for? Isn't he as safe there as he can be elsewhere, if not safer?"

"I fear not."

"Why not?"

"I have acquainted you with my interview with Sylvia and the two powerful Black Stars."

"So you have."

"Well, my chief object in proposing dispatch with the Dennett case was to see if the thought had already occurred to them—if, in fact, the old gentleman might be in immediate danger of being murdered."

"Well, and they were all against it, you said."

"They pretended so, but it was a blind. The thought had occurred to them before. They were only surprised at the old fellow having shut himself up in his house. That was all. I could read it between the lines."

"I don't see how you could. It seems to me they gave you excellent reasons for not hastening the matter, even from the Black Star standpoint. The fraudulent papers hadn't been prepared or registered; and it wouldn't be policy to murder their prospective victim until they were. They simply weren't ready and wouldn't be hurried."

"I wish you could have studied the faces of the woman and the two men while they were making those pretensions."

"Why?"

"Because then you would have been equally satisfied that they were pretensions."

"Oh, I shall take your word for it, captain, so far as that goes. Your judgment is necessarily superior to mine in anything of that kind. But what is to be done?"

"There is where I am puzzled. Old Dennett unquestionably ought to be protected, even in spite of his wrongheadedness."

"Undoubtedly."

"And my man Feeny, who will remain on watch there all night, is only valuable as a tool—never as an executive spirit, to act swiftly and on his own responsibility."

"Well?"

"And I cannot possibly keep him company as his superior. I shall have to run up to Greenwich Village again to-night to see how Danny and Gernon are getting on in that quarter. Then consider my last night's experience, not to mention what is before me to-morrow night. I shall absolutely require a sleep and rest."

"Well I should say so. But what then, my boy?"

The detective remained silent.

"Oh, nothing, I suppose," said he, at last.

Suddenly Mr. Lestrangle seemed illuminated, and he struck his forehead, while a grin expanded over his good-humored face.

"By Jove!" he burst out, "how dull of me not to twig your drift on the spot. You're act-

ually hinting to me to take your duty on this side of the river."

The detective smiled.

"Well, I didn't like to make the proposition outright," he confessed.

The man-about-town, whose adventures had probably therefore been of a vastly different nature, seemed to be rather captivated with the novelty of the idea.

"Why not?" he said, half to himself, and then, with a glance down over his well-fed person. "Do you really think I'd do for the job?" he asked.

"Not a doubt of it, sir," was the hearty rejoinder. "You are naturally brave, you can provide yourself with arms, Feeny shall look up to you as a natural leader, and the night's patrol out on old Dennett's garden-terraces overlooking the water will give you such an appetite for your breakfast as you have not had for an age."

"Gad! then I'll do it."

"Good!" said the detective, starting up. "I'll wait for you at the gate, and then walk up the hill with you and place Feeny under your orders."

"Gad! to think of me playing amateur detective in my position and at my time of life!" chuckled Mr. Lestrangle, hurrying away to make himself ready.

The detective had no less cause to be satisfied with himself, though he had not the slightest idea that old Dennett was in any immediate peril.

Mr. Lestrangle would have his thoughts distracted from the young girl and her mystery, the adventure would really do the gentleman no harm if not a great deal of good, and there was yet another point in Maggy's interest to be served.

On his way to the front gate he discovered Jane Gorgio haunting the neighborhood of the homestead like an unquiet spirit.

"What is it now?" he demanded.

"Nothing much, sir. My mistress is gone to bed at last, and I simply couldn't resist the temptation of hanging about the house in which I know my dear young lady to be."

"This is well; couldn't be better."

"What is, sir?"

"Your being here."

"But in what way, sir?"

He told her, as an evasive answer, of his proposition which had been accepted by Mr. Lestrangle.

"Bless me!" exclaimed Jane, in real alarm. "Then Miss Maggy will be left in the house without a protector—and with Jem Gorgio confined in the cellar, too."

"Not altogether. Mrs. Masters will be with her, while both John Thomas and Dennis, the coachman, sleep somewhere in the house."

"But away up in the attics—John once told me so!"

And Jane checked herself with a blush.

"Maggy will have another protector, far more vigilant and faithful than all of those together. I have provided for that."

"Who do you mean, sir?"

"Yourself."

Suddenly she understood.

"Oh, sir, you can't mean it?" she exclaimed, joyfully.

"Indeed, I do. That is one of my reasons for getting Mr. Lestrangle away, as I knew he would never consent to the arrangement, which is none the less the very best that could be made."

"Oh, sir! I shall never be able to thank you enough. I will defend her with my life, and can slip back home by daylight before ever I shall be missed."

"Conceal yourself now until my return."

Jane gladly obeyed, and just then Mr. Lestrangle made his appearance.

After the detective had duly posted that gentleman with Feeny as his subordinate, in Mr. Dennett's garden, he returned and introduced Jane Gorgio into the homestead, where a few words of explanation were sufficient to obtain Mrs. Masters's adhesion to the plot for Maggy's security.

A moment later, the young girl and Jane were in each other's arms.

The detective next proceeded to Greenwich, where an interview with Danny and Gernon satisfied him that everything had settled down to its normal quiet in the Black Star rendezvous.

In view of Danny's subsequent good service, the question as to the convenient firing of the blacksmith-shop was not pressed.

Then, having enjoined them to continued vigilance, Clew was enabled to seek his well-earned repose without any additional adventure.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

UNLOOKED-FOR REVELATIONS.

BUT, late as it was when the outworn detective retired to his rest, the stars were still lingering in the sky when he was awakened by a familiar knock at his door.

On opening it, Feeny, the faithful spy, entered the room.

He was looking terribly fatigued and anxious.

"Come, sor!" was all he said, in greeting.

"What's up?" queried Clew, at once beginning to dress himself with the utmost dispatch.

"The devil's to pay, your Honor! Mither Dinnett's house is blowed up; both Mither Dinnett an' Jerry is safe. Worse luck to 'em; an' it's only yourself as can set matthers to rights."

"Where and how is Mr. Lestrangle?"

"Kapin' Dinnett and Jerry quiet, and howldin' guar'd over that divil Jem Gorgio, an' him shot through the midribb, your honor."

"Jem Gorgio! news, indeed!"

And a moment later the two men were hurrying on foot to Fulton Ferry.

Feeny's story was a most unexpected one.

Notwithstanding the vigilance of the outside watch over it, the house had been secretly attacked by two ruffians in the dead of the night.

Dennett and Jerry had fired upon the intruders, but had been actually overreached by an excess of ammunition and implements of war.

One cracksman, Jem, had been shot, it was true, and the other one driven off, but such a fusillade had been kept up to effect this much that the hangings of the room in which most of the garrison's ammunition was stored, and in which the defense was being made, had taken fire. The two defenders had barely had time to run out into the open air before there was an explosion, with the effect of hopelessly wrecking an entire side of the house, though, by reason of a smart shower falling at the time, there had been no attendant conflagration.

Clew and Feeny were fortunate enough to catch one of the early morning ferry-boats pat, so that there was no delay at the river.

"Mither Lestrangle's chafe object in sending me for you, sor," Feeny further explained on the boat, "was, I'm a-thinkin', his fear lest the divil Jem may have had toime to give away the secret of your disguises to the Black Shtars."

Clew nodded, without speaking, though to tell the truth, he was torn with anxieties on more scores than one.

Brooklyn was entirely deserted at that lonely hour, and their footfalls sent forth hollow echoes as they went up the Hicks street hill.

The first gray of morning was making itself apparent.

Jane Gorgio, large-eyed with suppressed excitement was brought to the homestead gate by the echoes.

She gave a relieved exclamation on recognizing the detective.

"Oh, sir!" she began.

"Is Maggy safe?" he interrupted; "that is all I want to know."

"Yes, sir, perfectly. But there's much more you ought to know. Madam has—"

But he had already hurried on beyond hearing.

A strange scene greeted the detective as he accompanied Feeny into the neglected Dennett grounds.

The southern side of the fine old house had been more or less shattered by the explosion, and presented a pitiable spectacle.

Yet so lonely had been the hour, and so isolated was the estate, that no attention had been attracted to the scene from the neighborhood.

A single group were gathered under the half-shelter of a ruined summer-house on the high bank overlooking the water, and these presented a strange blending of the comic and the tragic.

At one side sat Mr. Lestrangle, pistol in hand, keeping guard over a prostrate and desperately wounded man, whose injuries, however, gave some evidences of having been ministered to.

At a short distance away, and in spite of Mr. Lestrangle's constant and angry rebukes, sat Mr. Dennett and his man Jerry, rocking to and fro and groaning in unison.

Both were night-capped as on the last occasion when they were introduced to the reader, and now, as then, blunderbusses and horse-pistols were to be seen in readiness, but there was yet a difference in the pair, in master and man, so far as demonstrativeness went.

The rich man was simply gazing at the wrecked roof-tree of his fathers, and giving evidence to his lamentations in the helpless, querulous tones of the miser mourning over his losses.

Jerry, however, blear-eyed and crack-voiced, with a bottle of spirits in one hand and the neck of another sticking out of his bosom, was making up for what the other lacked in noise by an uninterrupted series of "wurras" and "asthores," as if he were at a wake over the remains of his dearest friend.

Mr. Lestrangle hailed the arrival of the detective with an air of unmitigated relief.

"Thank God, you are come, Clew!" he exclaimed. "Another hour of this sort of thing would drive me stark, staring mad. Has Feeny partly explained things?"

"Yes."

"Well, for God's sake, stop the jabber of those cowardly idiots in some way, if you have to tumble them down the bluff! Then we'll try to make something like head or tail out of this infernal complication."

The detective began to set things to rights in a decidedly original way.

A thwack alongside the head sent Mr. McManus rolling into a bush, where he presently subsided into a drunken sleep.

Then, possessing himself of one of the fellow's bottles, the detective applied it to the sorrow-smitten land-proprietor's lips.

"Drink, man!" he commanded, imperatively. "Drink, guzzle, swill! It'll do you good. At all events, you've got to drink anyway!"

The old fellow stared helplessly, and then obeyed; slowly at first, and then with more eagerness, as if he liked the stuff, or it was touching the right spot.

"No danger!" said the detective, in a hoarse aside, in response to a serious look from Mr. Lestrangle. "I smelled of it, and it's only sherry."

The old gentleman continued to drink until the bottle was drained, after which he gently rolled over on his side and resigned himself to oblivion.

"Now we're a little ship-shape," said the detective, beginning to rub his hands, "we can attend to business. Is that rascal still alive, sir?"

"Yes; but not much more than that, though I have bound up his wound with some skill, as I have a smattering of surgery."

"Why, then, are you mounting guard over him?"

"To be prepared for a rescue; though the fear of that is about past."

And Mr. Lestrangle forthwith uncocked and put up his pistol.

"Are you in earnest?"

"In truth I am, Clew. The fellow won't tell me how many men were with him, and how was I to know but the whole gang might be in the vicinity?"

"I understood from Feeny that but one other was engaged in the house-breaking attempt."

"In the actual attempt, yes; he got away."

"Did you catch a glimpse of him?"

"No; only of his back as he ran off in the darkness."

"Won't Jem here speak?"

"Not to me, though he promised to have something to say to you, should you come in time. I'm afraid he has fainted."

But Jem hadn't fainted.

He at this juncture partly raised himself on one arm and signed the detective to approach.

The latter made sure that no treachery was intended, and then did so.

"I've no cause to love you, Captain Clew," the wounded ruffian managed to say with less difficulty than was expected. "But I'm dying—I'll be deader than a smoked herring in ten minutes. Give me a promise, and I'll let bygones be bygones."

Bygones with a ruffian at his final gasp! The detective smiled.

"You don't understand," gasped the dying man. "I mean I will tell you all I know, but for one promise in return."

This was a different matter.

"Agreed!" said Clew. "What promise do demand on your part?"

"That you will stand by my sister—Jane, you know—and help her out of Sylvia's and the Gang's clutches. She is tolerably innocent, so far—only part corrupted by that woman's deviltry."

The request took the detective so much by surprise that at first he could not answer.

"Promise me that—promise me!" urged Jem. "She has gone back on me, her own kith and kin, but perhaps justly; and I love her—I can't think of her getting any deeper into hell on earth. Promise!"

"I do promise, Jem!" exclaimed Clew, in a softened tone. "As you shall explain matters to me truthfully, so shall I be faithful to my promise, and Jane shall be saved."

"Speak—go ahead."

"Who was your partner in to-night's attempt?"

"Farnham—curse the hound!"

"Not any one else?"

"Not immediately, though One-Eye put up the private job for us, and now is euchered by Farnham in his turn."

"Explain."

"I'll try to. One-Eye and Sylvia believed Dennett had money buried in his cellar. They had already agreed between 'em to rob him of that, as a private job outside the Gang, when you called in disguise there last night. Even Bristol Bill wasn't into it. Farnham and I had been engaged for the dirty work. That was why I was lurking in the garden when you overpowered me."

"But Farnham is a deep 'un—deeper even than One-Eye, though so rough. He is Sylvia's favorite, and there was a side-plot between those two. Farnham and I were to get the money, then Farnham was to do me up, sink back to madam with the swag, and then they were to skip together, leaving One-Eye in the lurch, and he waiting down at the ferry-house, wondering why they didn't show up according to his understanding with Sylvia."

"Of course I didn't know this 'at first, but I do now, when it is too late. It all comes clear to me. All has happened just as was arranged between madam and Farnham—curse 'em both!"

He had been speaking with difficulty, and now paused for breath.

"What!" exclaimed the detective; "there was buried money in Dennett's cellar, then, which you and Farnham got?"

There was a sign of assent.

"And Farnham—was it he that treacherously gave you this death-wound?"

CHAPTER XXXV.

FRESH DISCLOSURES.

"YES; or it was the same thing," replied the dying ruffian, getting his second wind and once more managing to speak distinctly. "At the critical pinch he felled me with a blow, knocking me in line with the bushel of bullets that old Dennett and his Irishman were beginning to pour down-stairs at us. That was his game—curse him! curse him!"

"And has Farnham now joined the widow and run off with her?"

"Yes, yes! Oh, if I had only suspected their game, so as to give it away to Thompson!"

"The fugitives—they will doubtless remain in hiding at first?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Farnham owns a queer cottage up on the Harlem flats—it's the place we carried Traitor Knight to for safe-keeping till we could murder him at our leisure, but he somehow escaped."

"I know the house. Are they in concealment there?"

"Yes; that is, I am almost certain. Such was their intention."

"How have you divined all this so suddenly?"

"By putting this and that together—a sort of dying inspiration, I suppose. Oh, I can't tell you! The pain—the pain!"

The moribund's voice leaped into a painful pitch, and he began to writhe.

"Try to bear up, Jem! How did you escape from the home-tead strong room?"

"Oh, easy as eating oysters! Don't talk—don't talk! I am sliding off!"

"One thing more. You had penetrated my impersonation of Bunchy Fives—did you give that away to any one else?"

"Only to Farnham, on my honor! and he—he won't dare to make use of it. You see, he—both he and madam will now beat war with the Brotherhood, and—and they won't dare—Oh, the pain, the pain! Curse them all! Quick; I have your promise as to Jane?"

"Yes, yes."

There was a final spasm, and Jem Gorgio was gone to his dread account.

The detective arose.

"It is very fortunate that you sent for me, sir," said he to Mr. Lestrangle. "I don't know what we should have done without these extraordinary revelations."

Mr. Lestrangle had also heard every word of the disclosures, and he was looking unusually pale.

"Who would have thought that such a brute would have cared so much for his sister?" he exclaimed.

"Human nature is an odd quantity, even at its worst," observed Clew, a little sententiously, "and the Gypsy blood is a queer and contradictory strain."

"How could Sylvia have eloped with the other scoundrel, think you, without the woman Jane being privy to the intention?"

"Easily enough, since Jane would not have been in the house with her."

"How? Where, then?"

"In your house."

And the detective forthwith made a clean breast of the deception he had practiced, and his reasons for doing so.

Mr. Lestrangle accepted it in pretty good part, though he was still looking very grave.

It was now nearly broad day, and Feeny was sent to notify the Brooklyn authorities of what had chanced.

Mr. Lestrangle and Captain Clew waited to make additional explanations to the constables, who were not long in arriving to take the place in charge, and then set out on their way back to the homestead, with Feeny in attendance.

"What a cut-throat series of wheels within wheels it has all been, according to that ruffian's revelations!" exclaimed Mr. Lestrangle, after they had walked on for a short distance in silence. "Talk of honor among thieves and murderers!"

"I never do talk of it," returned the detective, philosophically, "because it doesn't exist, save in spots. Banded criminals are like banded business men. They are faithful to each other merely in self-defense, and remain so just as long as their common interests and safety pull together; after and beyond which it is invariably *saute qui peut*, as the French say, which is equivalent to, 'Every man for himself' and the devil take the hindmost."

"I believe you are solid there, captain. What are your next steps?"

"I am thinking it over now. Leave it all to me."

"Of course I shall."

"For one thing, Sylvia sha'n't escape. Rest assured of that. She shall fall either by the law she has outraged, or by the Gang vengeance she has ventured to brave—the first by preference, the latter sooner than not at all. It shall be my first step."

"That is well. But shall you persist in attending the murderers' conclave to-night?"

"Though the heavens fall."

"There is fresh danger now."

"It must be faced. The identification must be complete—the face of every member of the infamous fraternity, high and low, shall be indelibly impressed on my memory to-night, and a wholesale conviction thus be secured, or I shall die in the attempt!"

"But look here, the risk is enormous! What if they shall have penetrated your rowdy-disguise?"

"I must take my chances. However, every safeguard and precaution shall be adopted, as a matter of course."

The man-about-town did not say another word until they reached the homestead gate, when he suddenly held out his hand.

"Come in, my dear fellow!" said he, with much of his old heartiness. "But understand one thing."

"What is that?"

"I am done with practical detective-work forever!"

Clew laughed.

"Oh, but you mustn't be discouraged, sir!" said he, with mock deprecation. "True, it may not be so exciting as fishing, gunning, billiards, opera-going, and other fascinating pursuits of a gentleman of elegant leisure, but then, my dear sir—"

"Not so exciting? Hold on, old fellow; stop right there! Not so exciting? Well, I'll be teetotally—but no, I sha'n't swear, Clew. But understand, sir, that I am done—done!"

Clew laughed again, and followed him into the house, after instructing Feeny to await his return.

Mr. Lestrangle, on his part, after bidding a cordial good-morning to a rather anxious group that was awaiting his return, excused himself to the detective, and rested not till within the seclusion of his sleeping apartment.

The group consisted of Maggy, Jane, Mrs. Masters, John Thomas and Dennis, all of whom bore unmistakable indications of broken rest and uneasy vigils.

"The danger is all over," said Clew. "And even our young protégée need fear no discovery on the part of her enemies now, I am free to say."

His words were cheering, and a moment later he was conferring with Maggy and Jane in the library.

For the best of reasons, he deferred acquainting the latter with her brother's death, and then, with Maggy at his side and her head on his shoulder, he told them in general terms, without mentioning either Jem's or Farnham's names, the story of the scene in Mr. Dennett's garden, and the extraordinary revelations that had been made.

"Now it is your turn, Jane," he finished by saying. "In the first place, when and how did Jem escape from the cellar?"

"At two this morning," said Jane. "My young lady and I were sleeping together, when we were awakened by the smashing of one of the cellar windows."

"I sort of felt what was happening, and was quickly peering down into the garden from the window, after quieting Miss Maggy's fears."

"I saw Jem make his way out of the cellar. Had he gone off down the street, I shouldn't have cared, but when I saw him making across the hedge for Sylvia's house I was prepared for the worst."

"What did you fear?"

"Madam's appearance under the window in short order, demanding the custody of my young lady; and, in the event of being refused, summoning force to support her demand."

"But as the time passed, without anything of the sort, I grew puzzled. Presently I saw Jem and another man steal out of the next garden, and take themselves off, it was too dark to tell in what direction, though I could distinguish my brother by his shape and peculiar walk."

"Then I was more bewildered than ever, for I felt certain that Jem had told Sylvia all he knew, and yet there was no demonstration on her part."

"It wasn't long before my bewilderment was increased by remarking Sylvia herself come out of the house, accompanied by a man I felt sure was Mr. Thompson, whom she went as far as the gate with."

"They spoke in very low tones at first, but, as they were separating, I could overhear their words:

"Remember now," Thompson said, "I shall await you all at the ferry-house even up to broad daylight. If there is any hitch or disappointment, you shall hear of me, with a vengeance."

"Have no fear, my dear George," madam re-

plied, soothingly. "Not an item of the programme shall be forgotten."

"Then they separated, madam going straight back to the house, without so much as a glance in this direction, though long ere this she must have known not only of Miss Maggy being in hiding here, but also of my treachery."

"Miss Maggy and I then dressed, to be ready for any emergency that might arise, for I was determined not to give her up if resistance were possible."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE LONE HOUSE ON THE FLATS.

"HAD the rest of the household been aroused?" asked the detective.

"No," continued Jane, "but I thought it about time they were. So I ran and awakened Mrs. Masters, telling her of the situation. She, in her turn, did a like service for John Thomas and the coachman. After that we all remained on watch together at one of the lower windows."

"Time dragged on, however, and I was still mystified as to Sylvia's intentions. Presently the mystery explained itself, in part, at least. It had grown a little lighter, the sky having cleared, and there came a man to the madam's house whom I was sure I recognized as Mr. Farnham. He also appeared hurried, though stealthy enough, as if laboring under some great excitement, which yet did not get the better of his caution."

"No wonder," interposed the detective, in a low voice. "He doubtless had reason enough for excitement."

"As soon as Farnham appeared," Jane went on, "my suspicions were aroused that something treacherous was in the wind. For I remembered the secrecy with which Farnham had always timed his visits, out of fear that Cooper or jealous Mr. Thompson would suspect their nature, and then I recalled the confidential parting of the latter with Sylvia a comparatively short time before."

"Farnham went into the house. He had evidently been expected. Moving lights appeared, going from one room to another. At last my curiosity could stand the strain no longer, and, even against the entreaties of Mrs. Masters and the rest, I skipped out and went on a tour of observation. I was none too soon."

"Lanterns were glimmering along madam's back garden. I followed, and was just in time to witness Sylvia's elopement with Captain Farnham. They went away in a small sail-boat that was managed by one man, and they seemed to carry off considerable luggage and valuables with them. The mystery was solved, at least in part, and poor Mr. Thompson would wait at the ferry-house in vain."

"That is all. From what you have told me, sir, I infer that Farnham was one of the men who effected the robbery up at Mr. Dennett's place and that faithless Sylvia, while hoodwinking Thompson, was only waiting for him to come back with the proceeds, in order to facilitate the elopement."

"That is true, Jane. And I have now to impart a sad piece of intelligence for yourself." He was very grave and gentle. "The other robber—the one that was left dying behind and who made the important revelations to me with his dying breath—"

She took the alarm on the instant.

"Ha! it was my brother—it was Jem Gorgio?" she cried, pressing her hand to her heart. "Speak!"

Clew only bowed his head on his breast.

Jane started up with a bloodless face, clutching at her throat as if choking.

Then she fell forward and was caught by the detective, who resigned her to Maggy's care.

"I will send the housekeeper," he whispered, kissing Maggy on the forehead. "After that I must go, and you will remain here, my darling."

"Yes, I will remain here," said the young girl, submissively, while twining her arms about the fainting woman. "But remember how anxious and lonely I shall be without you."

"Remember! As if I would forget it for a single instant!"

And, with another kiss, he was gone.

Feeny was found in waiting at the gate.

"What have you seen?" demanded his superior.

"One-Eyed Thompson, sor."

"Ha! the very man I most long to see. When and where?"

"In an' out o' the widdy's hoose again an' again, like a distracted mon, your Honor."

"Conceal yourself. Here he is now."

One-eyed Thompson had, indeed, just made his appearance, coming out of the grass widow's house.

His looks did not belie the spy's report, but as he saw the detective the veteran criminal speedily regained something like self-control.

"What is it?" said he, approaching. "Surely you can't be waiting to call me to book so early in the morning?"

"No, Thompson. This time I'm waiting to do you a good turn."

"A good turn? No joking?"

"Not at all. What you will doubtless consider a good turn, at all events."

"What is it?"

"To put you on the track of your missing widow and your mutual good friend, Farnham."

A demoniac eagerness leaped into the deceived man's face; he retreated a step, clinching his powerful hands.

"It is as I suspected, then—it is with Farnham that—that—"

He seemed choking, and could not continue.

"Your suspicions are correct," said the detective. "But while Farnham's treachery has cost you a lady-love, it has cost another man his life."

"Not—not Jem Gorgio?"

"Even so. Listen."

And the detective forthwith recounted what he knew of the tragedy on the Heights.

Thompson ground his teeth.

He, the veteran trickster and deceiver, to be thus tricked, duped and deceived in his turn.

He could scarcely realize it.

"Good God!" he growled; "and she doubtless really cared for that hound all along, without my suspecting it?"

"I have known it for long; though your friend, Bristol Bill, has been equally hoodwinked."

"But they must be mad—stark mad—the pair of them! Why, it isn't only me whom they have dared to affront, but— However, that's not here nor there."

"Do you think me 'fly' to nothing, One-Eye? Look to your Gang—your Brotherhood—and to yourself, for that matter! I'll run you all down, sooner or later—within six months, at the furthest."

Thompson did not seem particularly disturbed at this rather far-fetched threat.

"But the runaways!" he cried, eagerly. "You said you would put me on their track."

"Yes; but to do what?"

"That is my concern. You made no conditions, Clew."

"True; but will you remember the good turn in my favor, in case of need?"

"Indeed, I will! On my word!"

"Good! They eloped by sail-boat shortly before daybreak."

"But their retreat, their retreat?"

"Farnham has an isolated cottage on the Harlem Flats."

"I know the place. Is that it?"

"Yes."

"I'm your debtor for this, Clew."

And Thompson darted away in the direction of the ferry, with vengeful exultation on his brow.

"Quick, Feeny!"

The spy reappeared.

"Come; we must follow this up."

And the detective, with Feeny at his side, was on the avenger's heels.

It was quite a serious undertaking to go from the lower part of Manhattan to Harlem in those days.

Even the horse-cars had scarcely been thought of then, and Harlem itself was but a meager collection of scattered houses, unworthy of even the name of village, in the neighborhood of the present Third avenue (the Old Boston Road) and an old ramshackle bridge that formed the sole connection with the Westchester shore.

It was reached by boat when possible. Otherwise a stage route was in operation as far as the old Bull's Head Tavern (still standing on the corner of Twenty-fourth street and the Bowery), or perhaps a dozen blocks (i. e., empty house-lots and cabbage-gardens) further up; after which the Harlem-seeker was at the mercy of livery-stable accommodations, or the sturdy prancer perforce upon shanks' mare.

It was this route that was pursued on the occasion of which we write by the notorious criminal, One-Eyed Thompson, and as a consequence by the two men bent upon seeing the upshot of his errand.

As an earnest of the man's absorption in his purpose, he scarcely once looked behind him, adept in fugitive tactics as he must necessarily have been, and, indeed, seemed wholly careless as to whether he might be pursued or not.

This, of course, was all the better for the pursuers, who at last found themselves threading the Old Boston Road behind a fair-to-mid-dling livery animal, with their man, who had taken to the saddle, well in sight, but not too closely dogged.

They were well up in what is now the Yorkville and lower Harlem district, at that time lined on the left with farming lands, and on the right with the almost unbroken stretches of swamps and salt bottoms, showing occasional patches of timber, that were generally embraced under the name of the Harlem Flats.

"Might I ax your Honor a bit of a question," said Feeny at last, "if for nothing but to kape meself from going to shlope, which it is meself that is dying for the same?"

"Of course you may, Feeny," the detective replied. "I am as little wakeful as you are, I fancy, and yet sleep is the last thing we must think of at present."

"Thru for your Honor. I would then ax, if

it please you, sor, an' is it a murder that you're lookin' to entrap Mr. One-Eye into, by the sign?"

"By no means. There'll be no murder I'm thinking. Least of all will it be Mrs. Knight that will be murdered, or I am mistaken in the woman."

Feeny wagged his head with the closed eyes.

"Might I ax your Honor, thin, what it is that you expict to be achavvin' by the sign?"

"The heading off of the grass-widow's escape from the consequences of her crimes and plottings at any cost. There you are, Feeny!"

"An' might I be axing you, sor—"

"No; not another question, 'by the sign' or otherwise. Saut up!"

Thus silenced, the over-worked spy's head dropped over on his shoulder, and he would presently have been asleep, but for a nudge of his companion's elbow that almost knocked him out of the buggy.

"Whist, sor!" he droned, shaking himself and looking up after a fashion; "is it the widdy herself that we've caught in her ar-rums at last?"

"No, you fool! but we're in sight of the cottage. Wake up!"

"Where?" And Feeny was once more broad enough awake.

The detective pointed to an isolated, picturesque little white cottage, near a narrow by-road and close to the water's edge, amid a wild scene of embowering and swamp greenery, and with several boats at their stakes but a short distance away.

The solitary horseman they had been keeping in sight was galloping along this by-road at a break-neck pace.

"There it is!" said Clew; and he also whipped up briskly.

But before he could turn into the by-road the horseman had dismounted, rushed down a garden path and disappeared into the house.

Then he urged his horse to the utmost, for the first time the prey to grim and unquiet forebodings.

"Didn't you hear a cry?" asked he.

"I thought I did, sor," said Feeny. "Faix, there it is again!"

But it was not repeated after that, and when the buggy was brought to a halt at the roadside Thompson was coming away from the cottage, his brow clouded with a savage disappointment, his muscular hands working convulsively.

"If you've thought to come in at the 'finish,' you're out," said he, surlily.

"What! has the widow skipped?"

"Yes; the foul fiends seize her till she is ripe for my clutches!"

"Hold on, One-Eye! I must detain you till I investigate."

But, with a coarse laugh, Thompson had already sprung into the saddle and spurred away.

Full of still stronger forebodings, Clew led the way into the cottage.

The Black Star magnate had not lied, nor yet had he revealed the truth.

Sylvia, it was true, had vanished, leaving not a trace, high or low.

But in the best bedroom of the cottage a dreadful spectacle was presented.

It was that of the double-dealing ruffian, Farnham, freshly stabbed to death in many places.

Crime had at least partly revenged itself upon infidelity.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

KNIGHT, *alias* GERON, MAKES AN ASTONISHING REPORT.

FROM the scene of the murder the detective lost no time in making the best of the way to Headquarters, whence a general alarm was instantly sent out for the arrest of the presumed murderer.

There was no regret over the loss of Farnham to the world upon which he had so long been a depredator; but to ensnare Thompson, a far more dangerous because more intelligent man, into a like net, from which he would not be likely to emerge with life, would be a yet deeper satisfaction to the community at large; besides crippling the Black Stars, perhaps greatly to the Fighting Detective's advantage, at their approaching conclave, which was likely to prove the touch-stone to his plot for their extermination.

Still, the telegraph was not in use in those days, and the New York Police Department was a slow-moving service at the best, besides being generally inefficient and subject to corrupt political influences to a degree that is hardly conceivable at the present time.

One-Eyed Thompson, together with Bristol Bill and certain other of his notorious intimates, had disappeared for the time as completely as if the earth had opened and swallowed him.

It should have been mentioned that no money or valuables had been found in the lonely cottage with the body of the murdered Farnham, so that the inference was that he had been heartlessly robbed by the companion of his treachery when she had deserted him to his fate.

Clew was now completely worn out, the afternoon was growing apace, and he felt the imperative demand of recuperative rest in view of the ordeal before him.

He accordingly completed his arrangements for the surrounding of both the Cherry street and the Greenwich Village resorts of the Black Stars by cordons of police at the appropriate time, sent Feeny home to bed, left instructions for his two remaining subordinates when they should put in an appearance at Headquarters, and hurried away to his lodgings.

But he had hardly entered his room when he was joined there by Knight, *alias* Gernon, whom he nevertheless greeted kindly.

"I'm tired to death, and half-dead for want of sleep," said he, beginning to undress without ceremony; "but it may be that you are just the man I most want to see. You come from Danny Crook."

"Partly from him, and partly of my own judgment, sir."

"News from Greenwich?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"A strange woman has been at the rendezvous since early this morning."

"Is she there now?"

"She was when I left."

"Face not recognizable?"

"Not visible—veiled."

Clew slapped his thigh.

"Good! it's your wife."

Knight looked astonished, and was forthwith primed as to recent happenings of which he had naturally been ignorant up to this moment.

His face darkened.

"The she-fiend! Had I known this, I doubt if I could have kept my hands off her throat, even at the cost of my life!"

"You know it now, and you'll still restrain yourself!" said the detective, sternly.

"I know it, sir. I am not forgetting the conditions of my service. My desire for a sweeping revenge is too profound for such a remissness."

"That's better. I suppose you would relish the task of shadowing this woman?"

"I should consider it a boon."

"It is yours, then. That is, if you are not tired out."

"I can be tireless in such a cause. Moreover, Danny and I, by relieving each other's watch, have obtained both rest and sleep."

"Good, then! You know your task. But you will find yourself back in Brooklyn sooner than you anticipate."

"You think she will venture back to the old house there?"

"Sooner or later, yes, without a doubt."

"I should think she wouldn't dare."

"There is a witness in that vicinity to her misdeeds that cannot fail to draw her back—the wronged girl, Maggy."

"True."

"Don't lose sight of her, and, above all, remember Maggy's danger. You are all to report to me at Headquarters this evening. Be off with you now, Gernon, and good luck!"

After a refreshing sleep of several hours, the detective found himself once more at Headquarters as dusk was coming on.

Feeny and Danny Crook were on hand, but Gernon had not yet put in an appearance.

The two individuals named were assigned to join the police force that was to lurk in the vicinity of the Cherry-street rendezvous, in anticipation of the detective's signal from the midst of the Brotherhood's conclave, in the event of his falling into danger, or otherwise to await his more formal instructions.

They had no sooner taken their departure than Knight, *alias* Gernon, arrived.

His appearance indicated recent misadventure, if not hard usage.

The detective sternly surveyed the man's pallid face, a newly-bandaged cheek-wound, and a disorder of habiliments that was no less woe-begone.

"You have lost her!" said he.

Gernon's head fell upon his breast in mute and mournful assent.

"Doubtless you were not to blame," continued the detective, more gently. "Tell me how it happened."

"On my life, I hardly know! I seem to have been in a dream."

"You caught on to her once more in Greenwich?"

"Yes, sir; just as she was stealing away."

"Then she did not lead you back to Brooklyn, as I predicted?"

"No, sir."

"Whither, then?"

"Almost everywhere in the upper part of the island, sometimes on foot, sometimes in a coach. She must have suspected my shadowing from the first."

"Doubtless. Whither did she finally decoy you?"

"You'll hardly credit it."

"I shall believe your statement."

"To the lone house on the Harlem Flats, where I was once briefly confined—where you discovered the murdered Farnham!"

Clew's astonishment, naturally enough, was unbounded.

"Good heavens! you are not in earnest?"

"I am confining myself to unvarnished fact, Captain Clew."

"But why should she have lured you to that dreadful spot?"

"I don't know—unless for the purpose of doing for me, as she had done for Farnham."

"But she could not have suspected your identity?"

"Hardly, I think. It would seem impossible."

"Tell the story."

"It was scarcely two hours ago. I had tracked her in a coach up the Old Boston Road to the by-road corner, which I readily recognized not only from your description, but also from memory. Here she dismissed her conveyance, and set off on foot down the lane in the direction of the cottage. I imitated her example, though with due caution, and no little uneasiness. She at last disappeared into the cottage, which seemed to have been deserted by the officers left in charge of the murdered man's remains, as I had been informed by you."

"I followed, though with a growing horror of the locality that increased with every step. An odd cottage, that! The veiled woman seemed to have entered it but to mysteriously disappear."

"I threaded the deserted rooms in amazement—deserted save one; that one occupied by the murdered body, now decently composed, as if awaiting the coroner's investigation."

"Here, in the very presence of the mutilated corpse, I was suddenly attacked by masked men, who seemed to start upon me from the very walls."

"They were two in number. I seized a chair, wielding it, bludgeon-fashion, with such frenzied desperation as to momentarily foil the unexpected attack."

"While warding off their murderous blows, the woman I had been shadowing also burst mysteriously into view, her face for the first time unveiled. We had not been mistaken in our quest. It was the face of my wife, of Sylvia—of an incarnate fiend, beautiful even in its diabolism."

"Kill him!" she screamed, exultingly. "He is a spy of Clew's! Cut him to pieces, stab him to death as you stabbed the presumptuous fool, Farnham, at my bidding. I shall love that one of you that deals him the most numerous death-wounds!"

"But her fiendishness inspired me with renewed desperation, no less than with horror. Though receiving many blows, I managed to keep them at bay while backing out of the chamber and out of the house. Sylvia shrieked with fury over my prospective escape, but she had no weapon with which to assist the onslaught of her bravos, and couldn't devise it otherwise."

"As I escaped into the open air, the door was shut and locked in my face. Then a sudden stillness fell upon the house, that freshened my curiosity, even while it appalled me. I had retreated to the open road, where I made some attempts to bind up my hurts, as you may perceive."

"You may hesitate to believe me, sir, but it is none the less true that the sudden and mysterious hush that had supervened fascinated me to return and renew my investigations."

"I did so with the utmost wariness, as you may imagine. The door was once more unlocked, the chambers again wholly deserted, save by the corpse."

"I needed only that experience to flee from the cottage as from a spot haunted and accursed. My story is done. Here I am in your presence one more. This is my report."

"I believe it," said Clew, after a reflective pause. "In the light of recent events and mysteries, which might otherwise seem fabled or fantastic, I cannot but accept the truth of your extraordinary story."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE UNMASKING.

THEN the Fighting Detective struck his heavy fist on the heavy oaken table at which he was sitting with a force that threatened to shatter it.

"By heavens!" he exclaimed; "then it is possible that I was deceived, almost against the evidence of my senses, and that Thompson was not the murderer of Farnham, after all."

"It would really seem so."

"There was no suggestion of preparation in Sylvia's words?"

"Preparation? She was wildly, frenziedly exultant!"

"Yet Farnham was still bleeding—the wounds seemed not two minutes old when Feeny and I discovered the body."

"I would suggest that they might still have been an hour or two old. Investigations are not apt to be critical under such circumstances."

"True. But Thompson has acted wonderfully like a guilty man since then."

"Has he so?"

"Yes; he has effected one of the mysterious

disappearances for which he is occasionally noted, after a particularly dangerous job, and his closest pals are also missing."

"Still, sir, might that not have been incited by a mere dislike to being arrested on suspicion?"

"I suppose so. Be off to Brooklyn with you now, Knight."

"To Brooklyn?"

"Yes; Sylvia will be sure to turn up there, sooner or later. Where Maggy is that woman will not not be far away. Wait; you shall take a note from me to Mr. Lestrangle."

"I shall do my best," said Knight, as he took the note. "At all events, I shall defend Maggy with my life, if need be."

"I like that. Don't tarry."

The man disappeared, and Clew proceeded to invest himself with his impersonation of Bunchy Fives with unusual care.

He was filled with curiosity, no less than with anxiety, as to his presence at the approaching conclave.

Would Sylvia dare to be present, after her treachery to Thompson, and inferentially to the Brotherhood itself?

Would not Thompson, himself, in view of his having plotted with her for the robbing of old Dennett in their individual interests, also hesitate to meet his dreaded *confrères* of the Black Stars in council.

The detective rather hoped for a non-appearance of both, and especially of Sylvia.

To those alone, besides Farnham, now dead, could Jem Gorgio have communicated the secret of his, the detective's, disguise, the unmasking of which by the Black Stars at large could not but result in his instant assassination at their infuriated hands.

However, like Richard III., at Bosworth Field, he had placed his life upon a cast, and he must stand the hazard of the die.

The unsavory neighborhood of No. 21 Cherry street was apparently as deserted and lugubrious as on the previous occasion when he once more posted himself expectantly under the street-lamp at the mouth of the alley-way.

So far, however, Clew felt much more secure than formerly.

To the best of his ability, he had subsequently examined every point of the rear building's exterior, and now he knew that policemen were everywhere concealed near at hand, in readiness to silently surround the place the moment he should be once more conducted into the interior.

But in this very sense of security there was a suggestion of fresh danger. For what more unlikely than that these preparations could be made without being detected by the agents of the Black Stars and suspicion as to the nature of the plot against them being thereupon aroused?

But there was nothing for it but to wait, accept the risks, and act.

Once more was the *pseudo* Bunchy approached by two men pretending to be intoxicated, again were his hands grasped, with attendant consequences, and once more, after very similar inquiries and answers, was he led up the alley-way to the entrance.

His muffled conductors, however, were not the same as on the previous occasion, being shorter and of stockier build, this fact in itself being more or less confirmatory of the suspicion that all might not be so well as before.

Again was he led through the interminable corridors, and again, though without the preliminary of the sham murder test, did he feel that he was standing hoodwinked in the presence of the Brotherhood.

"Let the brother be brought to light and knowledge!"

The hoodwink was stripped away.

The detective with difficulty mastered a start of mingled disappointment and alarm.

Once more was he surrounded by the brothers, but all were masked as before, and now every man of them was standing erect, with a bared dagger in hand.

However, this might be only a new ceremonial, and the novice remarked that no female was present, and neither could he distinguish the characteristics of Thompson or Bristol Bill.

The tall and portly man whom he thought to be Lawyer Bat was the spokesman of the Brotherhood now.

"Brother Fives," said he, "it is known to the brethren that you have undergone the test placed upon you with singular promptitude and success."

The detective bowed with becoming modesty.

"The traitor you were designated to destroy duly met his doom, but how?"

"At my hands," exclaimed the candidate, absolving himself of the falsehood in his own conscience.

"So it would seem, or else you were aided by a strangely fatal coincidence," continued the voice. "The marked man dropped dead in his tracks at your very feet."

"Am I compelled to tell *how* I effected his death?"

"Did you effect it at all? Mind, you have the benefit of the coincidence in the minds of all present; but still that coincidence is susceptible

of an explanation that the brethren are curious to hear."

"I refuse to make one!" said the new brother, boldly.

"Your reasons?"

"The demand is unfair. The death of a marked man was demanded at my hands as a second signal proof of my good faith. As in the first instance, I was found equal to the test. The death was forthcoming."

"But subsequently declared by the coroner to have been due to heart-disease."

"I care nothing for the coroner. You demanded a dead man at my hands, and the dead man was forthcoming."

"Right and not right! It was an assassination that was demanded."

"You got it."

"Will you swear to that?"

"I shall not."

"Why will you not swear?"

"I do not choose to. I begin to suspect that I am being made a victim of a trick—that this is not the genuine Brotherhood of the Black Stars at all. Otherwise, I would be applauded, not contemned, for the zeal I have displayed."

There was a momentary silence, after which the speaker continued:

"You dare to suspect the genuineness of the Brotherhood?"

"You compel me to."

"What is it that would convince you of our genuineness?"

"Fairer treatment. I have undergone your prescribed ordeals successfully and without flinching. I have furnished you with the signatures, as promised. Whatever may have interrupted the Brotherhood's designs since then I would demand an explanation of no less than you. I have fulfilled my contract, let the Brotherhood fulfill theirs."

"What is it that you demand in return?"

"Confidence and complete affiliation, as promised."

"Brethren, you have heard," cried the masked leader, in a loud voice. "Is he adjudged worthy?"

A simultaneous "Ay!" was the response, accompanied by a flourish of the naked knives.

"Shall he be fully affiliated?"

"Ay!"

"So say we all of us! The brethren will accordingly unmask."

There was a general unmasking, and the leader, who proved to be Bat, strode forward and grasped the new associate by the hand.

The latter, however, had barely had time to more than half-study the twenty or thirty faces revealed to him when hurried steps were heard.

"Hold!" screamed a woman's voice. "Let there be no unmasking! Treachery is in the air!"

Then a door, theretofore concealed in the wood-paneling of the wall, suddenly opened, and the feminine associate sprang into view, her eyes blazing like coals through the eyelets of her mask.

The brethren had turned in the utmost consternation at the utterance of those warning words.

"Treachery!" repeated the woman, and her jeweled hand pointed menacingly toward the disguised detective. "My warning comes too late to prevent the unmasking. Well, I will take the chances of my brethren!"

She stripped off her own mask, revealing the features of Sylvia Knight, distorted with malignant fury.

"Treachery!" she reiterated, "and in that man's person. He is a disguised detective—a police spy!"

There was a clashing of knives, a turning of desperate men at bay, but the detective had by this time fully recovered from his surprise, and his spirits were equal to the emergency, whose next development might mean his own destruction.

"'Tis false!" he exclaimed, contemptuously shrugging his shoulders. "Who is this angry woman that would dare charge me with treachery? Is *she* worthy of the Brotherhood's confidence? Has *she* done nothing, to cover which she might well wish to divert the suspicion of the brethren from her own bad faith?"

A roar of approval, more or less unanimous, was the response, and the menacing faces and weapons were directed toward the intruder, but she was not dismayed.

"I can prove my charge," she declared, more calmly. "That man is a spy!"

The leader, by a significant gesture, restored something like order out of the consternation that was prevailing.

"This is a terrible charge," said he. "Is it distinctly charged that our newly affiliated member, Bunchy Fives, is a traitor and a spy?"

"Bunchy Fives!" she echoed, with a scornful laugh. "It is but a cunning counterfeit that has succeeded in imposing himself upon you. That man is Captain Clew, the detective—the sworn, persistent and deadliest foe of the Black Star Brotherhood!"

At the mention of that name, the panic and fury of the conspirators was indefinitely augmented.

But the detective burst into a disdainful laugh, notwithstanding that his secret alarm was almost at the top notch.

"This is too preposterous!" he exclaimed. "This woman is a systematic liar. Knowing herself to have earned the just vengeance of the Order, whose interests she has betrayed to her own greed, she seeks self-immunity in this ridiculous accusation against me."

She confronted him calmly, and it was felt by all as a sort of recriminative duel between the two.

"How do you know what you assert of me?" she demanded, "unless you are the disguised detective, as I have charged?"

"Know it? Why, the whole city knows of the Dennett affair, and of Jem Gorgio's death! I know, no matter how, that it was through your treachery. But that is not here nor there. Prove that I am other than Bunchy Fives!"

"I shall do so."

The panel-door again opened, and One-Eyed Thompson and Bristol Bill came through it, supporting between them a very drunken man.

The detective gave but one glance.

That man was none other than the genuine Bunchy Fives himself.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

SMOKING THEM OUT.

DECEPTION, as a matter of course, was no longer practicable.

In an instant the detective had sounded his secret signal, and bounded toward the secret door.

It was closed against him, but his back was against it, with Thompson and Cooper, strong men as they were, knocked to right and left and the helpless real Bunchy trampled under foot.

The conspirators closed in, with waving knives and blood-hungry yells, but out flew the magic fists from the dauntless figure at bay, and, tremendous as were the odds, for a moment the position was held—man after man going down under the lightning-like blows until, indeed, something like a barrier was reared of their stunned and prostrate forms.

"Kill him!" screamed Sylvia, frantic with mingled rage and terror. "The house is surrounded—don't you hear the police breaking in below?—and he has your faces stamped in his memory. Kill him, and be quick about it, or all is lost!"

A second combined rush upon the single man, and it would undoubtedly have accomplished his destruction, but for the door against which his back was pressed giving way at that instant.

As it was, he was precipitated back into the passage, and even had a chance to partly close the door again, and even hold it shut for a fleeting space.

Once more the detective's shrill signal resounded through the house, and then he could hear the policemen breaking through the main entrance door on the opposite side of the assembly-room.

"In widdit!" yelled a voice that he recognized as Danny Crook's. "Save de Fightin' Detective! Hooray!"

Then there was a double crash, and the detective's own bulwark of safety gave way at the very instant that the entrance of the police was assured on the further side.

His only chance was to flee down the narrow passage, pursued by the conspirators, now a frightened mob, far more bent upon escape than on vengeance.

The passage was dimly lighted.

At a convenient angle he turned at bay once more, bringing into play all the science of the renowned fisticuffs at his command.

Part of the fugitives succeeded in rushing past him; the rest, after knocking down several of the foremost, he drove back before him like a flock of sheep.

A last stand was made against his prowess near the smashed secret door.

Crash, crash, crash! shot out the shoulder-hitting gems of science, with a victim as the record of every stroke.

Then Clew followed pell-mell on the ragged vestiges of the fugitives back into the room, where the police were by this time in full possession, and the triumph was secured.

"Hooray!" yelled Danny Crook, dancing a fireman's hornpipe in the middle of the floor. "It was a free fight, and a good one! Boss, you're all right!"

Feeny was also there, and, next after Danny, was the first to grasp the detective's hand with tears in his eyes.

Clew took in the results with a single comprehensive glance.

Fully twenty of the conspirators were already in custody, or being rapidly placed in irons from among the prostrated men in the room and the adjoining secret passage.

But neither One-Eyed Thompson nor Bristol Bill was among the captured, while it was evident that Sylvia Knight, Judge Dredger, Alderman Fake and Lawyer Bat had succeeded in effecting their escape.

It was something, though not altogether, like the grave-side struggle in *Hamlet*, with only the part of Laertes in the cast.

But so complete, in other respects, had been

the detective's triumph that he was not down-cast by his disappointment.

He apprised the sergeant in charge of the squad of what persons had escaped, and then hurried away to headquarters attended by his assistants.

At headquarters a fine piece of fresh news was awaiting him.

The raid on the Black Star rendezvous in Greenwich village had been made on time, had thoroughly succeeded, some prisoners had been made, and a large amount of counterfeiting tools and material secured.

Having learned this much, the detective lost no time in setting out for Brooklyn, accompanied by Feeny and Danny.

At the exit from headquarters a pallid woman, who had been waiting under a street-lamp, started forward and accosted the detective.

"Are you Captain Clew?" she inquired.

He replied in the affirmative.

"I once did you a slight service," said the woman.

"Now I recognize you," said Clew. "You are Mrs. Farnham."

She bowed her head, the tears slowly trickling down her worn face.

"I suppose," said she, sadly, "you, as an officer of the law, can have little sympathy for a murdered criminal's widow."

"You mistake, madam," was the gentle reply. "No woman in undeserved distress ever appealed to my sympathy in vain."

"I am glad of that," she dried her eyes with a trembling hand. "I want you to do me a favor."

"What can I do for you, madam?"

"Let me in some way have access to my husband's murderess! She was in the same house with me to-day, but then I didn't know or even dream the truth."

"Murderess! It is the generally believed impression that your husband was killed by One-Eyed Thompson."

"It is not true. Thompson told me the truth to-night. My husband was newly murdered when he entered the cottage—murdered by that demoness, after she had lured him to his ruin, or by her instruments whom she had fascinated with her unholy beauty!"

"Are you just now from the house in Greenwich?"

"Yes; the police are in possession. But they did not molest me or Jem Gorgio's wife."

"Madam, I could not grant your request, if I would."

"Why not?"

"She alone, with perhaps a few others, has just escaped the wholesale arrest of the Black Stars. I do not know where she is at present."

"Perhaps not; but you can guess pretty shrewdly, and you are now on the way to her accursed Brooklyn house, in the hope of finding her there."

"How do you know that?"

"By divination, I suppose. Revenge is a wonderful sharpener of the faculties."

"Madam, you shall not go with me."

"I shall."

"I forbid it! Take yourself off, or I shall be compelled to order your arrest."

The woman eyed him for a moment with a strange expression in her white, set face, and then slunk back amid the shadows of the night.

Nevertheless, on the ferry-boat a little later, the detective remarked a silent, muffled figure sitting apart, which he felt sure was none other than hers.

"Let the poor creature have her way," he muttered, and thought no more about her.

It was long past midnight when he and his companions reached their destination.

Leaving his followers at the gate, Clew first passed into the homestead grounds, and was proceeding to the house when Knight, alias Gernon, sprang to his side across the dividing hedge.

"She's back again at last!" he exclaimed.

"Since how long?"

"Twenty minutes."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"Take Danny and Feeny with you, and surround the house. Look especially to the water side. I shall be with you presently."

The homestead door flew open to his knock, and Mr. Lestrangle in person warmly grasped his hand.

"We have heard some vague reports," said he. "Come in, and enlighten us."

CHAPTER XL.

SYLVIA AT BAY.

ALL the inmates were up and dressed, and it was not thought necessary to exclude even John Thomas and Dennis from the group that was waiting in the drawing-room for the reception of Captain Clew and his budget of news.

Maggy had succeeded in getting some articles of wardrobe from her former home, and was much more becomingly attired than when still adhering to her Quakerish habiliments.

She greeted her lover with a sweet smile, and

sat with her arm around Jane, who was looking still sad and mournful, but was otherwise composed.

The detective gave an account of the day's work in the briefest terms, and then asked about Mr. Dennet.

"He is up-stairs, under a physician's treatment," said Mr. Lestrangle, in reply. "He was my father's friend, you know, and I thought it best to look after him. But the old gentleman is very low, after the nervous shocks he has sustained, and the doctor doubts if he will get over it."

The detective was struck by a sudden compunction.

"I hope it wasn't the sherry!" said he.

"Set your mind at rest there," said Mr. Lestrangle. "Sherry is the very wine that is now being prescribed for him."

"You all doubtless know that Sylvia Knight is back in her house again."

"Word of it was brought to us by your spy a short time ago. That is why we are all up and dressed. We looked for you."

The detective arose.

"This last duty is before me," said he, with a somewhat troubled look. "I only hope, for the woman's own sake, that she will not think of resisting my authority."

But here, much to his surprise, Maggy came over to him alone, laying her hand on his arm.

"You must not go!" she exclaimed, half-decisively, half-entreatingly. "Madam is armed, and she will resist—to the death! I know it, and so do I Jane."

"Yes, my young lady is right," said Jane. "Madam is a desperate woman, and blood will be shed before she gives in to an arrest. We ought to know."

"But what is all this to me?" demanded Clew, still more surprised. "Whether she resists or not, the woman must none the less be arrested."

"But not by you," continued Maggy, now clasping his arm with both hands. "There is no hurry, and regular policemen can be found for that duty. You must not go."

He smiled, and then gently disengaged her grasp.

"My dear child, you are not fully yourself," said he, kindly. "Would you have me stand back from a desperate criminal, man or woman? It is too absurd. Remain here, all of you."

But for all that they followed him at a short distance as he quitted the house, and remained at the hedge-line observing him as he passed on through the adjoining grounds.

It was one of those opalescent nights when the heavens, covered by a light fleecy integument of cloud, seem to reflect a sort of brilliancy that is neither of the earth or air, and which yet renders objects more distinct than moonlight itself under ordinary conditions.

Clew was seen to briefly confer with his three followers, who then distributed themselves afresh so as to watch every corner of the house, in which several of the upper windows were lighted.

Then he strode up to the front door, and worked the knocker vigorously.

A window was thrown up, and Mrs. Knight, dressed as if for a ball (her hands, bosom and shapely bare arms flashing with rare jewelry, and a rich lace *fichu* so arranged over her head as to impart a coquettish Spanish air to her dark beauty) looked out and down.

"Who are you?" she calmly inquired.

The detective stepped out from the door-porch, and, looking up, displayed a small silver badge.

"Captain Clew, of the New York Detective Service," he replied.

"What do you want?"

"I have a warrant for your arrest."

"Indeed! Well, captain, I am sorry to disappoint you."

"I regret to say, madam, that my business admits of no delay."

"That is unfortunate—for you. Do you happen to observe that I am dressed for the reception of a guest to-night?"

"Madam, so it appears."

"Well, captain, I am accessible but to that expected visitor alone, and you are not he."

"Permit me to inquire, madam, what visitor you may be expecting?"

"A right royal and imperial one—the monarch of men and of the universe! DEATH!"

Then there was a swift movement of one of the jeweled hands, a flash, a report, and a bullet cut through the space the detective had occupied as he effected a timely evanishment under the portico.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Sylvia's musical voice—and there was a ring of desperation in it that caused a shudder among the spectators at the hedge-line. "Is it possible that you fear an introduction to my kingly guest?" then she suddenly disappeared, closing the window with a bang, and the Fighting Detective was relieved of a position which might otherwise have been anything but desirable or heroic.

At a sign, Danny Crook brought him an ax from an out-house, and he unceremoniously burst open the front door.

The hall within was seen to have been suddenly lighted up.

"Be ready," he whispered, "to rush in with me, all of you, when I give the word. We must carry the upper rooms by storm, at any cost."

The word was given, the remnants of the door hurled aside, and the four individuals precipitated themselves into the hall like the parts of an avalanche.

But the desperate woman had not been idle.

Instantly some sort of hand-grenade, dexterously thrown from the first staircase landing, fell and burst in their midst, filling the space momentarily with blinding smoke and stifling vapors.

Then there was a flashing descent of a jeweled figure, the exclamation, "Fool that you are, Algy Knight, to suppose that I wouldn't recognize you from the first!" an equally flashing disappearance up the steps, and, as the air cleared, Knight, alias Gernon, was discovered leaning against the wall, with the life-blood pumping out of a deep stab-wound in the neck.

"The she-devil has done for me!" he gasped. "Help me out into the air!"

This was done, and none too soon, a bullet, which followed their retreat from the head of the stair, drawing blood from Feeny's left ear. "What shall you do now?" anxiously asked Mr. Lestrangle.

The dying man had been assisted as far as the hedge, and thence, by John Thomas and Dennis into the homestead, and the discomfited assailants were standing with the spectators.

"Try it again, of course," was the detective's cool reply.

"There's a back doore an' a side doore, sor," suggested Feeny. "Might Danny an' me be after thrying a divarsion thim ways, by the sign?"

Clew nodded, and the suggestion was about being acted on when Sylvia again appeared at the window, which she had just opened, and made them a signal.

As she displayed no weapon, they advanced.

That the woman was now partly beside herself, by the desperateness of her situation and her resolve, if she had not been so before, was painfully apparent.

She had effected a change in her appearance by discarding the lace head-dress and letting down her long black hair, which, wreathed with starry jewels, floated around her like a tempestuous hood, accentuating the proud paler of her face and the marble whiteness of her magnificent arms and neck, while her fine eyes wore a strangely settled and yet dangerous look.

"My guest of the evening seems to delay his coming," she called out, in a full, clear voice. "I will parley with you, if you choose."

"What do you propose?" demanded the detective.

"A momentary interview in here with the girl Maggy alone. After that I shall consent to resign my recreant guest, and go off with you to a feast of your own choosing."

CHAPTER XLI.

A FIERY DOOM.

CLEW with difficulty restrained a furious and indignant outburst.

"Woman, you are crazy, indeed!" he exclaimed. "Such a thing is not to be thought of for an instant. Once more, I warn you to submit quietly to an arrest. I shall serve the warrant, if it costs every drop of blood in your body and my own!"

She had not listened beyond the first words, and a slight, exultant smile had crept to her lips, which was speedily explained.

"I shall go to her," said a calm voice, and the astonished detective turned to perceive Maggy already at his side.

Lestrangle and Jane had followed, after endeavoring in vain to dissuade her from her purpose.

"It is madness!" cried the former. "Don't yield to her, Clew."

And Jane Gorgio even threw her arms about the young girl, to draw her back.

"You will come to me, Maggy!" called out the woman from the window. "You won't forget that I was at least motherly to you at times—from the time that you were a helpless baby."

"Go back, Maggy, this instant with Jane and Mr. Lestrangle!" said the detective, peremptorily. "What are you thinking of?"

"Of what she claims—that she was good to me at times, and at most times, as far back as I can remember," was the young girl's composed answer. "I am not afraid—I shall go to her. I think it will induce her to be reasonable."

And she walked composedly toward the portico, Sylvia disappearing from the window with an exulting laugh.

The detective sprang after the young girl, determined to thwart her purpose even by force, but she broke into a run and disappeared into the hallway.

He pursued her even to the foot of the stairs, as she ascended them, and then was suddenly shocked back by the explosion of another grenade cunningly dropped at his very feet.

Then, as he was still reeling, there was a piercing scream in Maggy's voice, and she was dimly seen through the smoke in a death-struggle on the first landing with the maniac woman, in whose hand a long poniard gleamed.

But Maggy was both agile and robust, added to which her terror and indignation inspired her with a strength equal to that of her treacherous assailant, and she felt that she was struggling for her life.

Clew had hardly recovered from his shock before he bounded to the rescue.

The knife was torn from the maniac's hand, the victim from her clutch, and then the staircase seemed to be giving way.

However, as Sylvia was retreating with a baffled scream several steps higher up, the detective caught her first by the skirt, and then, as that ripped in his grasp, by the foot.

The next instant only the slipper remained to him, a fierce kick almost deprived him of breath, and he was rolling down the smoking staircase with Maggy in his arms, while Sylvia stood glaring and vociferating down at them with a face like a fiend's.

But the staircase was now blazing, no less than smoking, and, indeed, it seemed that the entire hallway had taken fire in an incredibly short space of time, though it was probable that the first grenade had had something to do with it.

The detective, however, staggered out unhurt, with Maggy still in his arms.

"Good heavens! this is simply terrible!" exclaimed Mr. Lestrangle, who, with Jane, John Thomas, Dennis and several loungers from the street, was at the portico. "But, thank Heaven that our dear little friend here has escaped harm at that wretch's hands!"

Maggy had by this time regained her composure, after releasing herself from her lover's clasp, and was now pressing close to Jane's side, looking very sad and with her lips compressed.

The detective and his two assistants ran around to the other doors, in the hope of rescuing the maniac even against herself, but both were found to be secured, and the ax had been hopelessly mislaid.

When they returned to the front, the hallway was a lane of fire, the blazing staircase was beginning to crumble, and the flames had apparently communicated with all the upper rooms with mysterious rapidity.

The unfortunate Sylvia still peered out at them from the top of the stair like a demoness from amid the fire-crypts of the region of the unnam'd, her hair tossing in the breath of the conflagration and still mocking them with her hideous laughter, as if perfectly indifferent to her appalling surroundings.

Here the landlord of the Pig and Whistle appeared with a ladder on his shoulder, and Danny Crook sprung to his assistance with the instinct of a fire-boy, but Denham came to a dead halt.

"Good Lord! could anything catch and burn quicker?" he exclaimed. "Why, the house must be built of tinder! Lend a hand, boy!"

But at this juncture a figure—a woman—suddenly dashed through the group and into the blazing entrance.

"Heavens!" cried Clew; "it is that Farnham woman, the widow of the murdered desperado!"

A general exclamation of horror had burst from the entire group.

But the woman seemed to dart through the flames, and even up the blazing stairway unscorched.

"Mine, mine! vengeance is mine!" she shrieked. "Murderess of Jim Farnham, your fate is upon you!"

Straight as an arrow at the flame girt maniac's throat she sprung, and for an instant they were seen locked together in a wild, weird struggle.

Then the stair and landing crumbled beneath them, there was a whirl-vortex of sparks, flames and smoke, and, without another cry, both women, doubtless equally mad, vanished into an abyss of fire.

As the horrified spectators shrunk back from the intense heat, every window above and below vomited smoke and flame, the cornices blazed, the roof began to wrinkle and roll up like paper, and the whole house was a mass of fire.

CHAPTER XLII.

A LAST REVELATION.

It was a few moments later, when the homestead party were returning across the hedge, having just separated from the extraneous crowd now swiftly gathering before the burning building, that Clew suddenly noticed Maggy stumble as if fainting.

"Heavens! what is it?" he exclaimed. "My dear child, can it be that you were hurt by that woman without our knowing it?"

"It is nothing—or, at least, not much," she feebly protested, clinging yet more closely to the

now equally anxious Jane. "I shall be better soon."

But she staggered even as she spoke, and Jane threw her arms about her.

"My young lady is hurt!" cried the latter. "See! there is blood on her sleeve. Oh, she must have been wounded."

Mr. Lestrangle was no less alarmed. "It is nothing—nothing!" repeated the girl, falteringly. "A scratch, I think."

Then she would have fallen but for her lover catching her in his arms, and they forthwith hurried with her into the homestead house.

"This way—into the library!" said Mr. Lestrangle, leading the way. "The surgeon is there who is attending to the wounded man."

Then Mrs. Masters joined the group, and a moment later the young girl was under the surgeon's care.

The latter had quitted his attention upon Knight, who was past praying for, though as comfortable as could be expected, with his bleeding stanchion and his faculties clear.

He stripped off Maggy's sleeve and gave a relieved sigh.

"It is trifling—a mere flesh-wound in the shoulder," he said, applying a bandage with practiced hands, while the young girl, to whom a restorative had already been given, looked up and smiled composedly. "There has been some loss of blood, but not a great deal."

But here Mr. Lestrangle uttered an astonished exclamation, his attention being attracted to something already noticed by both Mrs. Masters and the detective.

The young girl's pretty arm, thus exposed to view, was remarked to be of dazzling fairness—alabaster could not be whiter nor more pure—in extraordinary contrast with the olive complexion by which she had heretofore been distinguished.

In an instant Mr. Lestrangle was on his knees at her side, a wild hope coming into his face.

"What is this, my child?" he exclaimed. "You are not a brunette, but a blonde—a perfect blonde—or should be, but for your raven hair and the darkness of your face and hands."

Maggy smiled and then blushed painfully.

"Speak out, my dear young lady!" cried Jane Gorgio. "Madam is now dead, so that you are no longer bound by the oath she forced from you when a child."

"It is true," was all that Maggy could say.

"Yes," supplemented Jane, "she is as fair by nature as the queen-lily is fair among all the flowers of the field. And her hair will be like spun gold when time shall have worn away the false coloring that was from month to month applied to it, no less than to her face, neck and hands. I, also, was oath-bound in the secret, or you should all have known of it before this."

This was the crowning revelation, though it was to receive its addendum, which was, indeed, anticipated.

Mr. Lestrangle was clasping the young girl's hands, the hope in his face and eyes having brightened wonderfully.

"Your parents, my child, your real parents?" he said. "Do you know nothing of them?"

She shook her head mournfully, while Jane's countenance fell.

"I do, I know and will reveal all!" called out the dying Knight, from his position on the neighboring lounge. "Here!" he had taken from his bosom a worn package, done up in oil-skin, which he extended to Captain Clew, who chanced to be nearest his side. "The proofs—mementoes, keepsakes, and certain papers—they are contained in this package! Maggy is the child of Marguerite and George Disrow, also long since dead. Sylvia and I stole her from her home here in this very house when she was but three years old. Forgive—my wife persuaded me to do it—I—" he fell back, the blood from his deep, internally-bleeding wound gushing from between his lips.

Mr. Lestrangle had already caught Maggy in his arms.

"My child!" he exclaimed, in a voice thick with emotion and gratitude. "My niece, my only sister's darling! you have found your rightful home at last."

Maggy could do nothing but just lie contentedly in his arms, and softly weep, all was so strange to her.

The miserable Knight had again rallied, but for the last time.

He stretched out his hand to the detective.

"Sir, I have kept faith with you," he gasped, "have I not?"

"Yes," said Clew, not disdaining to accept the hand and press it, "you have kept your promise. Be at peace!"

"Thank God for that! Thank God, thank God! All is not quite lost!"

It was the ex-convict's last effort, after which he immediately fell back and expired.

The terribly-eventful day had found its crown of mingled tragedy and joy at last.

Even at this moment the first faint brightness of a new dawn found its way in through the library windows, softly touching the foreheads of all, of the dead no less than the living, with its phantom hand.

CHAPTER XLIII.

"SO RUNS THE WORLD AWAY."

A FORTNIGHT or so later Captain Clew called at the Lestrangle homestead after an unaccountable absence of several days.

Mr. Lestrangle, who had just come in from a drive, greeted him with his usual cordiality in the library.

"Maggy will be down in a few minutes," said he. "Make yourself at home, my boy. And where the deuce have you been keeping yourself? I have been wondering about you, day in and day out, while the poor child has grown positively pale and thin."

The detective made an impatiently resolute movement.

"Sir," said he, "I must speak at last. I know that I am not her equal in breeding or in fortune, and yet I have striven in vain to crush my love for your niece away from me. I find it impossible."

"Why the deuce should you crush it away?"

"Because I am not her equal, sir, to say nothing of my being a dozen years her senior—and yet I love her to distraction!"

"Oh, they all do that—when they love at all. Thank the Lord! I am myself only a superannuated old bachelor, with nothing in the world but Maggy to care for, and—to give away to you."

"To me! But I have no position, no fortune."

"Don't be so blamed self-depreciative! It isn't well in a detective, especially a Fighting Detective. Besides, you needn't remain a detective forever, and, as for fortune, you're as rich as I am at this moment."

"What can you mean?"

"You heard of old Denlett's death three days ago, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"And without ever handing you over that promised reward, or its equivalent in land of your own selection."

"That was nothing. I had long ceased to expect anything from the old miser's gratitude, promise or no promise."

"Softly, young man, softly! I have just returned from the reading of his will, made but a day before his death."

"What of that?"

"Not much. Only that he died with scarcely a relative in the world, and you are named as the sole legatee, on the distinct condition that you make Maggy your wife inside of a month. Otherwise, the property goes to her. You see, the old fellow must have grown to idolize the child during his painful illness under this roof, and there was no denying that she was very kind and attentive to him—the artful little mix!"

Clew was simply astounded.

"Good Heavens, sir!" he cried; "am I really awake, or is this a dream? If it is a dream, don't rouse me out of it. Let me pray that it may last forever."

"Dream be hanged! but you are all simply delirious when in love," and opening the door, Mr. Lestrangle called up the stairs, in his cheery voice: "Maggy, come down here! Here is a man that wants to marry you, but he hesitates to ask for you, because he is so decrepit and poverty-stricken."

She could not have been far away. She came bounding down the stairs, and then, more slowly and shyly, into the room, a vision of blushing blonde and golden-haired maidenliness such as is but unfrequently a feast for the eyes in this wicked and work-a-day world.

Then she was in her lover's arms, with the accustomed extravagances.

"Mad, mad, mad!" exclaimed the delighted old man-about-town, pretending to be mildly shocked at the spectacle. "But they all are when in this lamentable state, they all do it. How happy I am to have escaped it all by remaining a bachelor!"

Maggy and Clew were duly married within the conditional month; Jane Gorgio and John Thomas a few weeks later, with a comfortable future secured to them through the generous kindness of John's master.

The total breaking-up of the infamous Black Star Gang, as an organization, had been secured, and so thoroughly as to preclude the idea of such another combination, with murder as its cementing bond, and robbery of the assassinated as its superstructure, ever attaining to hideous strength and influence in our country, at least.

But the laws were miserably inefficient and corruptly administered in those days. Suffice it to say that not a single capital execution followed upon the masterly exposure, as brought about by the courage, bravery and indefatigableness of the Fighting Detective. But conspiracy to rob was more easily proven, and many members of the Gang, including One-Eyed Thompson and Bristol Bill, received State Prison sentences of varying severity.

Bat, Dredger and Fake managed to crawl out of the tragic muddle, with ruin to nothing but their reputations, and consequent depletion of their pocketbooks.

But they were politicians, and rich.

"So runs the world away!"

THE END.

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